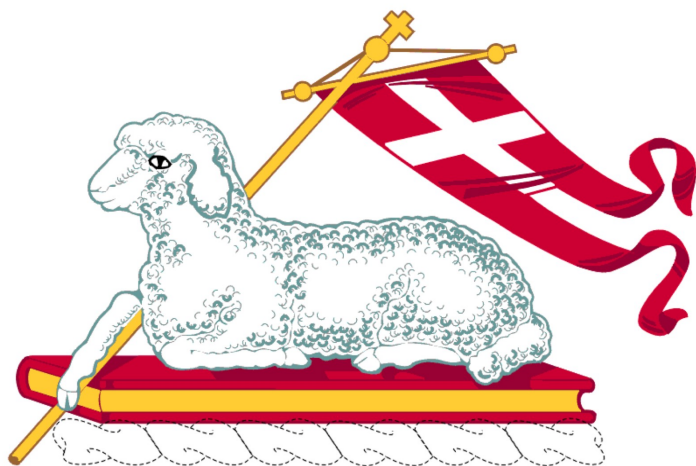


PULLING STRINGS



PEDRO ALBERTO VERA

Pulling Strings

First published 2006

Copyright © Pedro Alberto Vera, Some Rights Reserved.

ISBN 1-4116-6884-7

This publication has been released under the following Creative Commons Deed:

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- To copy, distribute, display, and perform the work Under the following conditions:
 1. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.
 2. Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
 3. No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
 4. For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the author at pedro@veraperez.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Foreword

Writing the first book was easy. Editing it was ten times harder and a lot more frustrating. The worst part of writing that first book was the hopeless procrastination that would kick in after just reading two or three pages.

A year later and I aimed to once again nailing National Novel Writing Month (<http://nanowrimo.org>) in three weeks or less.

I failed miserably.

After 10,000 words I was done. Not exactly an ego booster.

Another year passed and here I am: National Novel Writing Month 2005! And this time I did not chicken out! I wrote nonstop, and even had enough energy left to document my daily frustrations with my writing at one of my web logs.

The frustrations this time are a bit different. For example, procrastination is less of a factor than before. For the first time my problem is that my attention wanders and I waste my time in things that have nothing to do with the writing. For example, on my first day of NaNoWriMo 2005 I spent no less than two hours testing the layout and typesetting of the final book, and this was without having written the very first sentence yet!

On my first weekend I had planned to spend both days alone with my son PJ, him watching PBS and myself writing a few feet away (Ivette had to work both days). It did not happen. PJ is autistic, and he craves routine. Ivette had to come home halfway through her workday on that Saturday, and it totally threw off his schedule for the day. He spent the rest of the day trying to run away to find his mom, and I spent the rest of that day chasing him throughout the neighborhood and bringing him back home before he had an accident. I spent that Sunday childproofing all my doors and windows, but still I managed to write my quota.

On weekend two I had a rare migraine attack that cost me half the afternoon. I recovered and came out ahead by about two or three days, which let me take it easy for the next few days.

Week three came and went and I almost did not notice. By

Pedro Alberto Vera

Thanksgiving I was pretty much done. It is much easier to enjoy the writing when there is no external pressure. I could afford to write 100 pages per day for the last week, knowing I had already hit my minimum. I also got my first volunteers to read the raw draft, something that was much harder the first time.

Overall the experience was very different from my first book. *Shining Star* went through at least three full revisions before I was happy enough to sell it, and it still went through four more minor revisions since I published it. *Pulling Strings* went through two revisions. Also, the procrastination element is almost completely absent, since I now understand the self-publishing process and I got a much better idea of what I want to do with my writings.

Prologue

Puerto Rico (“rich port”) is a clump of volcanic rock both blessed and cursed by geography. The island is a little over 100 miles long by about 40 miles wide, and it sits in the middle of one of the greatest riches in the world: the Caribbean Basin. The Spanish were smart enough to realize this, which is why they struggled to keep control of it until the very end of the Spanish American War of 1898.

The Spaniards understood that controlling Puerto Rico meant having the ability to control access to the sea routes to the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. The Americans knew of this too, which is why they stuck around for as long as they did. It took them 50 years of foot dragging to let the nationals of the island to vote to approve a commonwealth with the United States.

It took another 60 years for an American president to screw it all away by opening a loophole that allowed Puerto Rico to become an independent republic for the first time in its history. What the "lame duck" American president did not know was that Puerto Rico sits on huge reserves of sweet crude oil, which is much easier to refine than sour crude oil. The Puerto Ricans, led by democratically-elected president William Roth, were now sitting on a fortune. Even the most conservative estimates claimed that these fields (most underwater but well within the internationally-recognized water boundaries) were bigger than all of the Saudi Arabia and Alaska fields combined.

The Americans were not thrilled.

President William Roth was a popular self-made billionaire and philanthropist, and he quickly turned the tiny island nation into an economic powerhouse. He orchestrated strategic deals with the United States, Germany, Israel and Japan that revitalized the high technology manufacture sectors of the island, all in exchange for discounted oil. Roth invested these profits in socially progressive programs to improve the standard of living of all of his citizens.

Now on his second elected term, President Roth must find a way to share Puerto Rico's newfound wealth with her sister nations in the Caribbean and Central and South America while at the same time keeping the United States from mistaking their goodwill with something bad, like for example, imperialistic intentions.

The Americans are very unhappy. They feel cheated for the way their rich former colony slipped away from them. They feel nervous as hell because of the way the Republic of Puerto Rico spreads its power base by throwing cash at pretty much anyone in the Western Hemisphere with little regards to politics.

This was of course bullshit.

What really made the Americans nervous was Cuba and Mexico. Cuba because they wanted to pillage her the second that Fidel Castro kicked the bucket. The Americans felt like they paid their dues for the "Bay of Pigs" fiasco, and it was time for their payback. With Fidel dead they could easily take over. Cuba would become another Puerto Rico literally overnight.

At this pace, there was no way in hell for Puerto Rico to pass on Cuba. It was reported that Fidel Castro and William Roth were on speaking terms, which was much more than what the current President of the United States could claim about either of the men.

The Americans felt that if Roth got his hands on Cuba, it would spell disaster for Florida, since it would take a nasty hit on one of their richest tax bases.

Mexico was a little different: The United States depended on Mexico for cheap (if illegal) labor. The worst kept secret in American politics was that the Southern United States economies were too dependent on "illegal" laborers from Mexico and elsewhere.

If the Puerto Ricans started to open factories in Mexico and paying a good competitive wage, suddenly Mexicans would stop immigrating to the north. Who the hell would want to go north to work three 4-hour part time jobs with no benefits, for minimal wage? The Puerto Ricans could afford to open factories all over Mexico, pay a decent, middle class wage with benefits and workers would have a 40-hour week. Puerto Rico makes a profit, and the median wages in Mexico suddenly mimic those of much richer countries.

Bayamón, Republic of Puerto Rico

Less than a mile from the center of Bayamón, on the western edge of the San Juan metropolitan area, there is a baseball stadium, dedicated years ago to a now almost forgotten¹ athlete. Land was cheap when the stadium was built, so it was surrounded by vast parking lots². The parking lots were open to the public, and it was common to find all sorts of vendors peddling their wares: anything from *chicharrones*³, trinkets for tourists and even panel trucks converted into mobile deli stands.

One of such panel trucks was usually found parked at the far end of the back parking lot. Anyone driving by during the mid morning would wonder what kind of genius would part a sandwich van so far from traffic.

Anyone driving by closer to lunchtime would find the back parking area completely gridlocked.

The panel van only sold one kind of sandwich, and you could wash it down with either Coca Cola or lemon juice. The sandwich was called a *tripleta*: half a pound of French bread (always baked at 5:30 AM the same day), stuffed with enormous mounds of steak, pork and pastrami.

\$5 bought you a *tripleta* and a can of Coke.

It was common knowledge that it was impossible to eat the *tripleta* in one sitting, so the cook did not frown on any of his patrons sharing. His only problem was that he worked based on volume, so he rushed people to pay and move on. He also made a point of never keeping more than a few chairs around, and refused the continuous complaints from his patrons to at least purchase a cou-

1 Juan Ramón Loubriel. He died in a plane crash in 1962 that also claimed the female volleyball team *Pinkins*, from Corozal, Puerto Rico. The world-famous *Combo de Puerto Rico* salsa super band was also scheduled to board that flight, but they missed it when one of their musicians refused to board the flight.

2 Those are now mostly gone once the first metro rail line in the country was laid down right across its main parking lot.

3 Fried pork rinds.

ple picnic tables.

A young man was sitting in one of the beat-up folding chairs. He was devouring a *tripleta* as if he had not eaten in a week. The cook noticed him a few weeks ago: he would arrive right around 11:30 AM, devoured a *tripleta* and disappeared. He dressed like all the college students that frequented the sandwich van, but he was the only young guy he had ever seen eating one of his monster sandwiches in one sitting.

Today was no different: the kid (the cook was 57, to him most of his customers were kids) showed up at the same time as always, he almost swallowed his food and disappeared. The cook could not even tell if the kid drove or walked over from who the hell knows.

Right as the lunch crowd started to thin, an unmarked police car arrived. The cook happily sold to anyone in uniform, but he always noticed that cops (also firemen and paramedics) arrived in groups. It was not normal for cops to show up in pairs.

The two policemen were dressed in the standard uniform for plainclothesmen in most of the tropics: loose, dark slacks, dress shoes and light short-sleeved shirts with the tails hanging out. They did this both because it was too damn hot to do otherwise, and it also gave a nice bit of concealment for their service pistols (most of them also wore a backup piece strapped to an ankle holster).

Both men wore sunglasses, and both reeked of aftershave.

"You guys hungry?"

"Nah, we are here on business," the taller of the two answered. He handed the cook a photocopied flier.

"Ever seen this guy?"

"Here? Are you kidding me? Ever been here during lunch? I sell hundreds of tripletas in less than two hours!"

"So you are telling us that you haven't seen that guy?"

The second cop asked.

Jesus Christ, that's the kid, the cook thought.

"I couldn't tell man. Like I said, we get a lot of people for lunch every day, and at least a third will look like your guy."

The two cops looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

"Would you at least call the number in the flier if you see that guy?" The taller one asked.

Pulling Strings

“Of course.”

Hell no, fuck you cop, the cook thought.

“Thanks for your help then,” the shorter one said as they turned back and got into their car.

The two “policemen” were actually commissioned officers in the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico (ARPR), both on permanent detail with the *Coordinador de Información*⁴ (CDI). They turned into PR Route 2 and headed towards Fort Buchanan, the old US Army base now housing the main elements of ARPR, plus the CDI, which was considered an autonomous agency that reported directly to President William Roth.

Thanks to the new metro rail line, which ran parallel to PR 2, traffic was almost nonexistent so they were back in CDI headquarters within a half hour. Neither talked while in the car. They usually drove an armored Chevrolet Suburban but theirs was back in the shop and they were stuck with a fleet car for the rest of the day.

CDI hated fleet cars under general principles. A few years ago an overzealous FBI agent had managed to get his whole squad kicked out of the island because they were bugging cars and offices. Even if the situation had been under control since then, fleet cars were still assumed to be bugged beyond detection, so they never talked about work while in these cars.

There was no such thing as a CDI headquarters building; at least as far as the regular ARPR folks were concerned. The two agents returned their car to the motor pool, and then walked over to the old Navy barracks. These were tiny studio apartments in two or three story cinder block buildings. The cinder blocks were hollow, which trapped air that helped keep the apartments cool even in the most brutal days of the tropical summer. The roofs were made with thick cement reinforced with steel bars, which made the whole structure hurricane-proof (especially since the windows were aluminum blinds instead of glass panes) and also acted as a heat sink to help dissipate even more heat.

4 Coordinator of Information, a concept the Puerto Rican Army “borrowed” from US Army Colonel William “Wild Bill” Donovan, who was awarded the Medal Of Honor in WWI and was one of the founding fathers of modern intelligence operations in the United States.

The two agents stood in front of the door to apartment 3A on the first barracks building. Its Navy gray paint was peeling, and it seemed to have the constitution of cardboard.

Very thin cardboard.

The taller agent knocked twice and waited. The door opened without any challenge from the inside. Once inside, the door closed automatically. What seemed to be a flimsy cheap door was actually two inches of steel with an old sheet of Formica stuck to its outer surface and painted with the oldest can of navy paint that they could scrounge.

As soon as the door closed, a second door opened into a waiting area. The waiting area was empty except for an old metal desk, obviously scrounged from the same place as the old paint.

Sergeant Raúl Morales, ARPR (formerly Specialist 4, US Army Signal Corps) had the duty.

“Where the fuck were you two at?” He asked in mock indignation.

The taller “cop” was Warrant Officer Rubén Martínez (formerly Master Chief Petty Officer, United States Special Operations Command).

Everyone called him “Chief Ruby.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are talking to?” Chief Ruby replied in the same tone.

Sergeant Morales jumped up and assumed a terrible facsimile of the position of attention.

“Yes sir, chief sir,” Sergeant Morales said as he mocked a salute.

“I was referring to the two assholes that left one of our priceless Suburbans at the shop without escort, and then forgot to tell someone at the office, chief, sir.”

The other agent was Captain Carlos Arocho, ARPR (formerly Second Lieutenant, US Army Corps of Engineers, detailed to US Army Special Forces). Captain Arocho was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

“Holy shit Ruby,” Arocho said, “we forgot the damn Suburban.”

Sergeant Morales was wearing his “See? I told you” face.

“I’ll take care of it,” Ruby said. “Can you handle the debriefing?”

In other words, fuck you, you are an officer, Arocho thought, you go and get your ass chewed while I check the Suburban for bugs.

Pulling Strings

“Sure, I’ll do it,”

Arocho said, already suspecting he was the victim of a setup.

Sergeant Morales tapped a button concealed under his desk, and a door to his rear opened.

Captain Arocho walked inside. As soon as the door was once again closed, Sergeant Morales pulled out his wallet and handed Chief Ruby a crisp \$20 bill.

“Asshole, I can’t believe he went for it,” Morales said admiringly.

“He’s a good guy, but I don’t feel like spending the next four hours getting reamed by Captain Vélez and maybe even The Admiral.”

ARPR Captain Vélez, formerly a US Army Sergeant assigned to the White House Communications Agency (WHCA, universally pronounced “Wacka”), ran CDI operations, and NRPR (Navy of the Republic of Puerto Rico) Admiral José María Baldorioty, formerly Rear Admiral (retired), US Navy, was the director of the CDI.

Vienna, Virginia

Human Resources retention specialists throughout the whole United States Federal Government were going through a few really rough months. And there were too many of these happening in a row. Why? Because of Puerto Rico's specific status, or the lack of it.

Officially, Puerto Rico was an independent republic with a democratically elected government. The damage was irreversible. Things got a hell of a lot more confusing when the newly elected Puerto Rican government decided to not strip off US Citizenship from anyone born in Puerto Rico up to the day of the signing of the new constitution. Because of this, about 9 million (half in the island, the rest mostly scattered throughout the US Northeast) Puerto Ricans held dual citizenship, and the United States could not legally strip the citizenship from any of these 9 million.

Of those four million still in the states, many held jobs with the government at all levels. The National Security Council originally tried to simply kill the security clearance of anyone of Puerto Rican descent, but it couldn't be done without triggering an avalanche of discrimination lawsuits.

After all, these people are still law-abiding citizens of the United States.

The Puerto Rican government damn well predicted that this would happen. They created a program that allowed skilled Puerto Ricans living abroad to move back to the island. The Republic of Puerto Rico recruited doctors, lawyers, intellectuals, policemen and soldiers. The soldiers usually transferred in grade, and quite a few received promotions soon after arrival. Former senior enlisted men were given the choice of either Warrant rank or a Commission in the ARPR.

The plan was never a secret, and the exodus drove everyone in DC crazy. Many enlisted military trainees finished their initial technical training, then took a taxi to the airport and took a direct flight to

San Juan. Most of these arrived at their training bases already carrying their plane tickets to the island, courtesy of the Republic of Puerto Rico.

The main military service branches simply turned a blind eye. They saw this as a logistical problem, since yes, all these people are walking away, but the Republic of Puerto Rico had cordial diplomatic relations with the U.S., and there was no sense spoiling the flow of (ultra cheap) Puerto Rican oil just because some people decided to listen to their consciences and go back home.

The intelligence agencies saw this a strategic issue, so the better funded agencies like NSA⁵, FBI⁶, and CIA⁷, started special surveillance programs. Every employee of Puerto Rican origin was subjected to a (for now) re-screening process, with special interest in any contact with the government of the Republic of Puerto Rico since the relocation program was announced.

Compared to New York City, the Puerto Rican population in the Washington DC Metropolitan area was virtually nonexistent, so none of the local agencies had much trouble enforcing their share of the new surveillance directives. Each Puerto Rican national in the area was assigned a small surveillance team, and all teams were coordinated from Langley (Homeland Security was still too interested in Arab nationals).

Team Five was currently tailing one Julio César Piccorelli, 25, currently working as a project manager for a government services company in downtown Fairfax. Piccorelli was born and raised in Puerto Rico, where he graduated with a bachelor's in Industrial Engineering from the *Colegio de Mayaguez*⁸. He was recruited by Northrop Grumman in Fairfax, Virginia, where he worked for the

5 National Security Agency, an autonomous branch of the US Department of Defense tasked with protecting US communications, providing foreign language analysis and research, and intercept foreign signals.

6 Federal Bureau of Investigations, the enforcement branch of the US Department of Justice.

7 Central Intelligence Agency, the main intelligence service of the US Government.

8 “Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas de Mayaguez” (literally the Mayaguez Agricultural and Mechanical College) was the old name for the Mayaguez campus of the University of Puerto Rico system. It is universally known in the island as “El Colegio”.

next three years. He switched to Dominion Federal, a government contractor, during the dot-com craze⁹.

As far as Team Five could figure out, Piccorelli was working a dead end job and it was a matter of weeks until he made his move. Their main concern was that he would try to contact the Puerto Rican embassy and offer them classified information about his projects in exchange for help in returning back to the island.

The suspicion was not enough to justify wiretaps, but it did not stop the CIA technical services folks from figuring out a way to force Piccorelli's Internet connection at home to run through a transparent proxy. This would allow the CIA to virtually tap into his Internet traffic without interrupting its operation, and it was literally undetectable.

Intercepting his work traffic was a bit harder because Dominion Federal had hardened network security (due to its government connections).

Not impossible, just a little bit harder.

By asking the right people it was possible to eavesdrop on Piccorelli's network traffic while at work.

Piccorelli had never bothered with landlines, but eventually the agents found his cell phone provider and cloned his cell phone. Not that it did them much good; Piccorelli never used it. Not even to call for a pizza.

At least half of the members of Team Five came from technical backgrounds. None of them could recall ever knowing of a geek that never ordered take out food.

It just did not happen.

Every day they would follow him as he walked from his condo in Arlington to the Clarendon metro rail station, where he rode to the end of the Orange line in Vienna. There he hopped on the first shuttle bus that left, regardless of route. He was lucky to work close to the only spot (apart from the train station) where all shuttle routes intersected.

Again, it was too convenient that Piccorelli happened to work at the one spot where he was guaranteed a nice shuttle bus every 10

9 The period from 1998 until 2004 when stock prices for web-based companies grew out of control, which eventually led to the failure of most of these companies.

minutes. On top of this, there was no way for them to check if he had stashed an emergency car close by.

Once consequences started piling up, Team Five started expanding. They had now taken over office space above Dominion Federal, which made it much easier to check on Piccorelli as he moved around the office. They debated contacting the information security officer for Dominion Federal, but they were not ready to go that far yet.

At lunch he walked across Main Street to a *falafel*¹⁰ stand, which eventually became Team Five's favorite lunch spot. Piccorelli never spent more than 20 minutes out of his office building unless he went to the Border's bookstore, about half a mile away. At the bookstore he usually alternated between the car aficionado magazines and the geek books section, and always ordered coffee on his way out.

He always left exactly at 4:10 PM, which made no sense since his worst-case scenario would be to wait 10 minutes for a bus. Team Five saw this bus trip as another suspicious opportunity for things like a brush pass¹¹ or bug out call. Due to the overlap between the shuttle routes they would need at least a half dozen extra agents riding the buses just to maintain the illusion of randomness.

The operation was starting to run out of control, and management was starting to get antsy. A surveillance detail with more than two dozen agents (not including support personnel on call) pulled a serious budget, hard to hide even in an agency with a black budget.

This day was no different: Piccorelli arrived at work right on schedule. He took his lunch break at 1:15 PM, and ate a falafel. He was out exactly at 4:10 PM.

This time he did not walk over to the bus stop, which was the first time in one month that he strayed from his daily routine since surveillance had started.

Instead of walking out front to Main Street, he turned into a side street that bordered the rear of Pope John XXIII High School. He

10 Deep-fried balls of blended chick peas, seasoned with onions, garlic and other spices. It is usually served in a folded pita bread.

11 A seemingly random encounter between two individuals, in which they exchange an object (for example, papers, micro film or audio tapes) without anyone noticing.

walked along the fence of the school, stopping a couple of times to watch the male soccer team practicing. He kept walking towards the front edge of the school and routes 29/50 (the two highways merge while crossing most of downtown Fairfax, then split off a few miles east). At routes 29/50 he turned left and walked along the front of the school.

The surveillance team had prepared for the contingency, so they never lost contact with him. A foot team followed him from both sides of route 29/50, and they even had people sitting at the bleachers in the high school soccer field. The only thing they did not have was a chase vehicle, since it was rush hour. The cars that had been tasked for chase duty were staged at the split of routes 29 and 50, at the high school parking lot and at the shopping center parking lot across from the street.

Piccorelli walked past the school and the McDonald's, then turned into a dilapidated motel close to the split of 29 and 50. He walked the open stairs to the second level and walked to the far end. He unlocked the door and went in.

Team five issued a collective "oh shit."

3

**San Juan,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Captain Carlos Arocho was left to cool his heels for 45 minutes before Captain Vélez opened the door to The Admiral's office and motioned him to get his ass inside. Arocho marched until he was 18 inches away from the front edge of the desk, assumed the position of attention and started to salute and report, but The Admiral waved him off: he had never been a fan of the whole report-and-salute ritual.

"What the fuck happened this morning?" The Admiral sounded annoyed.

"Sir, I think it was a misunderstanding, we didn't mean to leave the Suburban unattended," Arocho replied.

The Admiral looked at Vélez.

"What the fuck is he talking about? What Suburban?"

Vélez looked at Arocho and shook his head.

You're way off, dumbass, Vélez thought.

"This is the last time I am going to ask you: what the fuck happened this morning?"

The Admiral was starting to sound irritated.

"Admiral, we went to check him out as ordered. The cook claims he can't tell who's who."

"And you believed him?"

"Not really, it is obvious he recognized him. What I can't tell is if he is just covering for him out of stubbornness or if he is actually involved in this mess," Arocho explained.

"Are you going to stake it out tomorrow?" Vélez asked.

"Yeah, it's not like I have much of a choice, do I?" Arocho replied, knowing the answer.

"Get the fuck out of here and find that kid. And if you figure out that the cook is lying, scare him up a little bit. Just make sure you buy some sandwiches first, that sonofabitch is too good at what he does to throw him into a cell." All three men laughed at this.

Arocho came to attention and again tried to salute. The Admiral replied with an obscene gesture.

Piccorelli spent 35 minutes in the motel room, then left. He did not look around, or even look over his shoulder. He just simply locked the motel room, walked downstairs and out to the nearest bus stop and took the next shuttle bus that arrived.

Team five had agents in the bus and in all six cars in his train. They had people outside the train station every few yards up to the lobby of his condo building.

They did not even have to walk after him, since after they found out about the motel room management freaked out and sent every warm body available out to the street.

Within the hour CIA technical services had full plans of the motel and had cracked¹² into the motel's registration databases. By now upper CIA leadership had heard about the situation and the operation was upgraded.

One of the nice things about the upgrade was having preferred access to real time photo satellite data through the National Reconnaissance Office¹³ (NRO), just a few miles north in Reston. An imagery specialist was dispatched to NRO to act as a team liaison until real time links could be arranged between NRO and the field ops headquarter on the floor above Dominion Federal.

CIA technical operations dispatched a prepackaged field operations center to the Dominion Federal building. Everything they needed in order to setup a headquarters in a hurry was already packaged in Pelican¹⁴ crates, and a dedicated team was trained to unpack and setup everything in less than two hours.

A relief team was brought in. After the new arrivals had been

¹² While most popular media prefer to use the term hacked, the correct term is cracked. A hacker is a person that likes to tinker with the inner workings of complex things like computer hardware and software. A cracker is a person that gains illicit access to a computer system. A *phreaker* is a person that gains illicit access to a phone system, mostly to get free long distance service.

¹³ The NRO is an agency within the US Department of Defense that designs, builds and operates spy satellites for the United States.

¹⁴ Nearly indestructible equipment boxes. They are made of a very hard plastic shell, with foam inserts pre-cut to fit specific equipment. They are also known as transit cases.

briefed, most of the day shift agents headed for their homes. The team supervisors quickly put in place rotating schedules, to make sure nobody burned out right as the operation was starting.

The surveillance teams were already on a rotating schedule, so burning out was not an issue. A plan was set in motion to enter Piccorelli's condo sometime in the morning to do a light search and to plant some sensors.

The surveillance teams had heat scopes aimed at Piccorelli's condo. They noticed he stopped moving around 10 PM. The laser microphones aimed at the glass panes in his windows only picked up his TV and the continuous clatter of a computer keyboard.

Surveillance checked with technical operations, and they could not detect any network activity on Piccorelli's broadband Internet connection.

The surveillance technicians guessed that maybe Piccorelli was tapping into the wireless network based at the coffee shop across the street. To them it made a lot of sense, especially since it was free and it was strong enough to be picked up from Piccorelli's condo unit.

Technical operations scrambled to figure out how to monitor the Internet traffic from that wireless access point.

**Bayamón,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Warrant Officer Rubén Martínez and Captain Carlos Arocho were back in the parking lot behind the baseball park. This time they had their assigned vehicle: an armored Chevrolet Suburban, black and with tinted windows. It was the worst vehicle choice for a covert assignment: it pretty much screamed “Hey! We work for the government!”

And they both knew it.

The truth is that both Chief Ruby and Arocho liked to be overt about their duties, at least as long as they were working within the territories of the Republic. Overseas was a completely different manner.

“The smell of all that grilled meat is killing me,” complained Chief Ruby.

“Tell me about it. We should have eaten something before coming here, since it was obvious that we could not just walk over and buy a couple of his monster sandwiches.”

Chief Ruby used a hand signal to tell Arocho to shut up and look in that direction.

The kid was stepping out of a beautifully maintained 4-door 1981 Toyota Corolla.

“Shit,” both men muttered at the same time.

The Toyota Corolla was the most popular car in the country. Not even the new generation of super-hybrid cars had been able to convince people to get rid of their pristine old Toyotas. Chasing that car anywhere in the metro area would be close to impossible, so they had maybe 10 to 15 minutes to place an electronic tracker before the kid was done with his lunch.

Arocho speed dialed CDI.

“Vélez, you are not going to believe this shit.”

“Let’s see,” Vélez replied. “The kid drives a 1981 Toyota Corolla.”

“How could you possibly know?” Arocho asked.

"Easy, had you driven to the college and looked at their parking lot you would have seen that at least half the kids drive those Toyotas." Vélez explained. "He wants to fit in, and they are cheap."

"Do we bother bugging it?" Arocho asked.

"You don't have a choice. We got a van down by the mall, do you want us to send it to you?"

An olive branch.

"Sure, send them in, we are the only idiots parked in a bullet-proof blacked-out Suburban."

Both Vélez and Chief Ruby chuckled.

"They'll be there in five minutes, they were already rolling." Vélez said before hanging up.

"Well shit, at least the tech services guys stand a better chance at bugging the car without getting caught." Chief Ruby offered.

Exactly five minutes later a battered delivery van rolled by the Suburban. The driver nodded, then drove over to the sandwich van and dropped his front passenger, telling him he was going to drive the van around to find a parking spot and to order food for both.

The kid noticed them but immediately returned his attention to devouring his *tripleta*.

The van drove slowly towards the far end of the parking lot, and pulled by the kid's Toyota.

Arocho did not even bother to look; he knew the technician was extremely skilled at what he did. Chief Ruby tried to watch him through his rear view mirror, knowing he was wasting his time.

The technician appeared less than 15 seconds later. As he walked over to the sandwich stand he pulled out his wallet as if to count his cash.

That was the signal that the sensor drop was completed properly. Had he failed he would have combed his hair.

The technician walked over to the sandwich stand to join his buddy. They carried their food and sat right next to the kid, who was oblivious to them. They talked shop (their cover was that they were cable television contractors) while they ate.

Right as the kid stood up to leave, the cook poked his head outside of the sandwich van and bluntly told them to hurry the hell up so his other customers could use the chairs.

The two men shrugged, grabbed their food and carried it to their van, where they spent enough time finishing eating in case the “kid” had counter-surveillance in place.

Once they drove out of the parking lot, the driver called CDI to report that the bug had been planted successfully.

While CDI in Puerto Rico was preparing a possible counter-espionage operation, CIA agents in Vienna and Arlington were sharing a collective headache.

Sure, they were almost positive that Piccorelli was a “player” and not an innocent bystander. The problem is they did not know yet if he was a lone wolf type or if he was part of a bigger network.

Nailing a single agent was useless if the rest of the network was left intact.

CIA agents were still struggling with the public wireless access point that Piccorelli was using to access the net, instead of using the broadband connection in his own condo. They did break into the wireless network, but it wasn’t enough: Piccorelli was super-encrypting¹⁵ his wireless network connection.

The motel room was also a problem: it was too early in the investigation to tell if Piccorelli had someone keeping an eye on the room. Unless they could prove that someone else was not checking the room, they had no choice but to try to sneak into it at night.

Piccorelli resumed his normal routine, so the surveillance team returned to their normal tempo of operations. All the additional personnel was assigned to deal with the efforts to crack Piccorelli’s multi-layered encryption and in trying to figure out what the hell was the deal with the motel room.

Team five was split into three sub-teams. Five-A tagged Piccorelli wherever he went. Five-B dealt with his wireless network connection and any possible incursions into his condo. Five-C dealt with the motel room problem.

Management was pushing to have the motel room become its highest priority and to shift the wireless network issue to the NSA, since it was their cup of tea. Team Five-B resisted at first but they

¹⁵ In other words, once his wireless connection was broken-into, the resulting data was still encrypted with a different cipher.

did not really have a choice but to accept the outside help.

**San Juan,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

William Roth, democratically elected president of the Republic of Puerto Rico, was in a foul mood. Very little was known about him except that he was a self-made billionaire and he had helped orchestrate the transition of Puerto Rico from a second-rate territory of the United States into the major politico-economical player of the Caribbean basin. Not much could happen in the Caribbean unless Puerto Rico explicitly agreed to.

Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, did not like that a hell of a lot. Hugo Chávez was a madman bent on driving the Americans crazy. Roth saw this as a strategic challenge, since Chávez was messing with his biggest oil customers.

Hugo Chávez was the reason for President Roth's foul mood.

Roth was trying to control his temper. One of the reasons for his huge success in business was his ability to keep things in perspective. This unnatural coolness unnerved his rivals and earned him a reputation as a cold-blooded bastard.

After a few more minutes, and now much calmer, Roth asked his secretary to fetch The Admiral.

15 seconds later, she walked in without knocking and announced that The Admiral was ready to report to the President.

Roth signaled for her to let him in.

Admiral José María Baldorioty was slightly older than President Roth, and of similar build.

The Admiral's job was to be the Republic's premier Spy Master. He single-handedly ran the consolidated intelligence operations for the country, under the umbrella of the office of the Coordinator of Information, or CDI. The Admiral made no secret that his inspiration for the naming and overall structure of the agency came from American intelligence activities in the earlier months of WWII. He was supposedly a retired Admiral from the United States Navy, but

nobody dared to ask him. Only Roth knew his true background.

The Admiral did not report formally. The two men had known each other for over twenty years, and neither had much patience for formalities.

Instead, he dropped his gold-braided flag officer's cap on the nearest table he could see, and then walked straight out to the terrace that faced the 500-year Old Spanish fortifications of Old San Juan. Roth followed and both men sat down in a forged iron bench that was at least 300 years old.

Almost new by Old San Juan standards.

"Hugo Chávez is making a nuisance out of himself and is starting to piss off the Americans." Roth said.

"Yeah. And I bet the Americans are going to whine about the oil deal, right?" The Admiral replied, not expecting an answer.

"Of course. The way they see it, it is our fault for convincing them to buy the oil from us, and of course, for taking over the area." Roth explained. "So yeah, this madman moron asshole is our problem."

"Here's an idea," The Admiral's eyes lit up. "Let's bump it up a notch or two. Call the Dominicans and tell them we are willing give them a 2% cut on sweet oil."

Roth smiled.

"The Dominicans counter-offer with 5%, which means we still make a killer gross margin on the sale. Venezuela takes another hit on their foreign trade, and they shift their bullshit rhetoric to us instead of the Americans." Roth elaborated. "We are still in as much deep shit as before, but we distract Chávez from bothering the Americans, and we open up a new market for our oil. And yeah, we stick it to Chávez again."

"I am guessing that you are going to do this, not just use it to threaten Chávez?" The Admiral asked.

"The deal happens first, then we tell Chávez. After he tells me to go fuck my mother I'll tell him the next time I am going to offer 10%. We can afford to take a hit on the gross margins if it means fucking him up." Roth was starting to feel pleased with the way his chips always fell. Sometimes he felt like he should be doing something to reward The Admiral, but the man was a patriot, plus he was already rich: money meant nothing for him.

Roth was already a billionaire, and now with the oil production in full blast, and all the manufacturing ventures in place, he no longer needed to spend his own money to get things done in his government.

The Republic of Puerto Rico was self-sufficient.

President Roth was about to offer The Admiral to have lunch together, when his *aide-de-camp*¹⁶ walked over and handed a BlackBerry device to him. The Admiral read the message, handed the device back to his aide and excused himself.

Roth did not bother asking, The Admiral's job was to worry about these things so Roth did not have to.

Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby spent most of the day driving around Bayamon and Guaynabo, never getting more than ten cars close to the kid's Toyota. The car had been bugged with a passive monitoring device with less than 100 yards of effective range. One of the most interesting secrets of the new government was that the new traffic flow management system installed throughout the island nation also worked as a sensor array that could be used to track distinct vehicles at will. As long as the car was driving on a public road, it could be tracked within ten feet or so.

Their Suburban was equipped with a GPS¹⁷ receiver connected to a DVD-based mapping system, and it had been modified to also receive a tracking signal from the traffic analysis network. As long as the kid did not switch cars without the tracking teams noticing, they would always know where he was.

Both Arocho and Chief Ruby thought that it was great that they had this technology available, but it did not help them make sense of the kid's movements around the western San Juan metro area.

He simply drove around.

16 The aide-de-camp is an exceptionally bright junior officer that is assigned to a flag (General or Admiral) officer both to provide assistance and also as an educational experience.

17 Global Positioning Satellite, a network of satellites that broadcast geographical location signals for military and civilian use. With the proper GPS receiver it is possible to calculate its location within 10 feet. The GPS network is owned by the US Government and can be selectively degraded by geographic area so its accuracy falls to 100 feet or worse.

Tracking teams in alternating cars and in check points along the road reported the kid was not using a cell phone, and he did not seem to be wearing a “hands free” ear piece for a cell phone.

Chief Ruby was not especially thrilled about spending the day stuck in a car. Arocho, on the other hand, did not really give a shit. He would rather be out in the field than back at headquarters processing security clearance paperwork or whatever clerical bullshit Vélez could come up with.

“Why don’t we just pull him over?” Chief Ruby asked.

Arocho was left speechless.

“I mean, we don’t know shit about him,” Chief Ruby elaborated. “He drives around all day for no reason. He doesn’t have a cell phone.”

“And?” Arocho asked.

“We pull him over, we check him in the prints database. If he is not a resident of the island and there is no entrance visa, we deport the sonofabitch.”

“Ruby, if we do that then we kill any hope of grabbing the rest of his network.”

“Captain, sir, you are assuming there is a network. What if this is a false flag op and he was sent here just to fuck with us?”

Shit.

Arocho called Vélez. Chief Ruby could easily tell there was much cursing on the other side of the conversation.

Fairfax, Virginia

Over the previous two days Team Five-C (Piccorelli's motel room surveillance) had managed some progress. The rooms to the left and underneath Piccorelli had been rented by CIA administrative services employees posing as traveling salesmen (and thrilled about being part of a real field investigation).

The CIA technicians orchestrated a block-wide electrical power blackout. As expected, most of the motel guests that were still awake walked out and started complaining. The technicians used this mess to sneak into the two rooms to setup their gear. 15 minutes later electrical power was restored and the "techies" were already drilling tiny holes through the walls so they could route fiber optic cameras through them and into Piccorelli's room. The actual opening for these cameras was nothing but a pinprick, so it was nearly impossible to spot with the naked eye.

Or so they hoped.

They also installed thermal and acoustic sensors and hooked into the phone wiring for the building, just in case. The techies and management argued about jamming wireless access around the building, but it was agreed that it would do more harm than good, especially since they still could not guarantee that Piccorelli was not using counter-surveillance.

The NSA had already cracked the second layer of encryption at the wireless network access point across from the condo, but now it was up to CIA to sift through all the data recovered. This could take days or maybe even weeks.

The Admiral was having a good day, especially since the move towards discounting sweet crude oil to the Dominican Republic, which fit pretty nicely into their strategic plans for the next couple of years. He was also enjoying how easily Hugo Chávez was fooled by this move and had correspondingly shifted his crazy rhetoric towards the Republic of Puerto Rico and away from the Americans.

Pulling Strings

Business as usual.

The Admiral was already considering calling it a day and going home early. If he got lucky he might even be able to play with his 3-year old grandson.

Then his phone rang.

God dammit.

“Admiral, *El Presidente* is on the line.”

For the hundredth time in as many days, The Admiral cursed the day he hired his secretary. What he really needed to do was to find himself an old battleaxe like Roth did. An old hag that knew what the hell she was doing, not like the idiot bimbo that The Admiral had hired to be his, mostly because she would look good at the desk.

“Alejandra, for the hundredth time, when the President of the Republic calls, you pass me the call immediately. Don’t ask me if I can take the call!”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, you do that. Connect him before he fires me for incompetence.”

The line clicked.

“William, I am terribly sorry. I don’t know how to get into her thick skull that your calls are to be passed through, not put on hold.”

“Don’t sweat it, we got bigger things to worry about.”

Here comes the headache. I knew I was not going to be able to go play with my grandson.

“Like?” The Admiral asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

“The oil deal went well, but you already know this. What you don’t know is that Haiti, Cuba and Jamaica now want in.”

“Mister President, I would guess these are wonderful news. What is the catch?”

“The catch is that Chávez has already started to bitch about it before we even sit down with their trade delegations, he is going to raise a stink.”

“Sir, he always does that.”

“The Americans are paying attention. They have this idea that they get to control over what happens to Cuba,” President Roth ex-

plained.

"While we respect our friends from the north, we are a sovereign republic, and we have not signed any kind of treaty that forces us to not trade with Cuba," The Admiral replied.

"Exactly. I need CDI to have people ready to deal with the ramifications of any deal with Cuba. Haiti and Jamaica can be run through normal channels."

"Yes, Mister President. And what about Chávez?"

"Chávez is a big boy. If he wants to play rough, we can play rough too. I am sending you my file on Chávez; read it call me once you think you can put it into work."

Roth hung up before The Admiral could acknowledge the order.

Vienna, Virginia

Julio César Piccorelli had a normal workday. He arrived at the usual time, had his falafel around 1 PM, and then went back to work.

At 3:05 PM he wrote an email to his quality assurance technician explaining the bug fixes he had just submitted to their code repository. He sent a copy of the email to his manager, so he would be aware that the code fixes were undergoing testing and that Piccorelli was now available for new tasks.

Piccorelli knew that it would take his inept manager about half an hour to figure out what other work to send him. He logged out of his workstation and instinctively reached for his backpack, then realized he had almost screwed up. He took out his wallet and pulled out a plastic card. The card was identical to a cell phone SIM¹⁸ card. He opened a compartment in his backpack and plugged the finger-nail-sized card into a concealed slot. He closed the compartment, then carefully stepped away from it.

Piccorelli walked out of the office suite, took the elevator to the basement and got into the back of a FedEx delivery van, where a change of clothes and facial prosthetics were awaiting for him.

Three minutes later he looked just like the driver of the FedEx van. The original driver walked to a Mercedes that was waiting close by. The Mercedes sped off immediately and headed over to the Puerto Rican embassy a few miles away.

Piccorelli, now in disguise, drove the FedEx van to the Federal Express sorting facility in Herndon, just a mile or two away from Dulles International Airport. He turned in his hand-held package-tracking computer, and then stepped outside for a cigarette.

A second Puerto Rican embassy Mercedes pulled by and Piccorelli got into the back. He would be sneaked out of the country in a Puerto Rican flagged Learjet within the hour.

¹⁸ Subscriber Identity Module card. A tiny card with a chip embedded with all the information needed to assign a cellular phone to a particular subscriber.

The surveillance team that was monitoring his office did not notice him as he fiddled with his backpack, or that he was no longer in the office.

At 4:05 PM, a device inside of Piccorelli's now discarded backpack was activated. The card that Piccorelli had plugged into the device had programmed its activation time and duration. The device created an electromagnetic pulse that effectively fried the electronics of every computer within 50 feet of Piccorelli's desk, including the master server room. It also killed phones, pagers plus of course most of the surveillance electronics on the CIA suite above of Piccorelli's office.

At 4:07 PM similar devices were activated in both the motel room and at the condo. By the time CIA had decided to screw it all and enter both units, the computers found at both places were useless. All information had been lost.

Forensics teams were dispatched to process all three scenes, without even bothering with warrants.

By the time CIA, Homeland Security and Transportation Security Agency got their acts together; Piccorelli was dozing off 40,000 feet above the Atlantic and out of US jurisdiction.

Worse, they still did not know a thing about him or what was his purpose.

Captain Arocho, Chief Ruby and Major Vélez observed as elements of FURA¹⁹ surrounded and stormed the small house where the "kid" had been staying at for as long as they had been tracking him.

The FURA assault troops blew both front and rear doors with shaped charges, threw flash-bang²⁰ grenades inside and easily overcame the now dazzled kid.

The kid (nobody knew his name yet) was cuffed with flexible cuffs on both wrists and ankles, and he was blindfolded but not gagged. A FURA medic checked him to make sure he was not wounded. Once

¹⁹ Fuerzas Unidas de Rápida Acción, the elite police strike force that was created in 1986 to combat the traffic of illicit drugs and immigrants. Since the creation of the republic FURA was converted into an autonomous special operations unit, operating along both the Puerto Rican Police and the Army.

²⁰ A grenade that produces a simultaneous loud explosion and blinding flash, used to temporarily incapacitate its target(s) by overwhelming their senses.

the medic nodded to signal that the kid was not hurt, he was strapped into a stretcher and carried aboard a FURA helicopter (built in Puerto Rico under license from Eurocopter). As soon as the helicopter took off, the rest of the FURA troops dispersed, leaving the scene to CDI.

CDI had already brought in their forensics team to comb through the house, so Major Vélez left to report to The Admiral.

Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby stayed until their relief showed up, desperately hoping he arrived before the press did.

“Are they going to take him to Salinas?” Chief Ruby asked.

“Yup.”

Washington, D.C.

Almost overnight most of the American mainstream news media started paying attention at the lack of noise coming from Venezuela, and at the increased interest that Hugo Chávez was showing to the Puerto Ricans. It did not take long to find out about the oil discounts for the Dominican Republic.

Probably because it was a slow news day, everyone took it and ran. Editorials ran accusing the presidential administration of allowing its former commonwealth to become an empire that threatened to swallow most of the Caribbean, Central and South America.

The 24-hour news networks started to bring in their “experts” who theorized on the consequences of a Puerto Rico suddenly turning Communist. Or on the American reliance on Puerto Rican oil and what would happen if the Puerto Ricans decided to not honor their deal.

Most infuriating to the press was the American president’s lack of concern about these developments so close to their south. Most attempts by the press to get a reaction from the White House were simply blown off as not worthy of a reply.

To add insult to injury, somebody had orchestrated a public relations campaign attacking the Venezuelan oil interests within the United States. It was not widely known that Venezuela owned 15 refineries throughout the southern states, and owned at least 20,000 gas stations under the CitGo brand plus many regional semi-generic brands.

Everything got hit at the same time.

There were daily, well-organized, demonstrations in front of all of the refineries, and people simply stopped buying their gas at Venezuela-owned gas stations. The TV and paper ads said that Venezuela was using the money from the oil sales to help terrorists. This was greatly enhanced by well-edited video clips of the many anti-American rants of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

This is the last thing that the Americans wanted. They had al-

ready assumed that Chávez would leave them alone because of the oil deal with the Dominicans, and they could not figure out who was orchestrating the media blitz.

Chávez actually went as far as to try to call President Roth personally. Roth put him on hold for half an hour, and then told him to go fuck himself.

This was not the first time that President Roth had used this kind of language against President Chávez.

Fort Allen, in Salinas (or Ponce, depending on whom you ask), Republic of Puerto Rico, used to be a training base for the US Army Reserves and National Guard troops from the island. It was also used as a refugee camp for a few years, but it was mostly deserted by the time of the creation of the Republic.

Thanks to its remote location, the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico immediately took over it and used it for whatever it is that they wanted that required a certain degree of privacy. For example, it was used as a secure location for interrogations and other things better kept discrete.

Fort Allen guarded one of the greatest secrets of the Roth administration: the capture of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, the head of the *Macheteros*²¹ and one of the most wanted criminals in the United States. He was never formally arrested, he was never read his rights and he had not been granted access to his lawyer, if he even had one.

Nobody outside of a very small circle knew that Ojeda Ríos was under custody.

Now the small compound in a remote corner of Fort Allen was going to be used for the second time for similar reasons. The kid was flown directly to Fort Allen. His clothes were removed and sent back to CDI headquarters for analysis. The guards hosed him down with cold water from a garden hose and threw him, still naked and wet, into a stark cell.

Every surface of the cell was covered with 1/4-inch thick steel plate. The edges were welded and the plates were affixed to the concrete floors, walls and ceiling with 1/2-inch diameter rivets. The

²¹ “Cane cutters,” the nickname for a terrorist splinter group that traces back to the Armed Forces of National Liberation terrorist network.

door seemed to be solid enough to be used for a bank vault.

Everyone thought that these cells were overkill, but Major Vélez from CDI had insisted because of the psychological effect of getting locked into such a cell.

The kid was left wet and naked in one of these super cells for 24 hours. Optical fiber cameras were used to avoid weakening the walls. Every time the prisoner tried to fall asleep, a guard walked-in and dumped a bucket of cold water on his face.

After 24 hours the first effects of fatigue settled in and the cold water buckets stopped working. Time to start the show.

The prisoner was handed a bright orange jumpsuit and shower shoes. He was taken to an interview room. The room was twice as big as his cell, and it had a metal picnic table welded to the floor. The table had iron rings welded into it.

Before the prisoner could ask what was the point of the iron rings, the guards ran a pair of cuffs through one of the rings and re-cuffed him. He sat down in one of the benches, not knowing why he would be there.

Major Vélez walked into the cell; he was carrying a laptop computer and a one-inch thick manila folder. He did not introduce himself.

Vélez sat down, opened the laptop and turned it around so the prisoner could see its screen. A video was playing.

The video showed an old man in shackles being led out of a building, then walked over to a tree. The old man was blindfolded. While two men held him firmly, a third man, dressed in a business suit, walked over, pulled a pistol and shot the old man on his left knee.

The old man screamed.

The two men that were holding on to him forced him to lean in a way that more weight would be carried by his wounded leg. He screamed even worse.

The shooter stepped around and pulled his blindfold. The old man was Filiberto Ojeda.

The prisoner started crying.

Vélez closed the laptop computer and pushed it aside. He pulled glossy photos from the manila envelope and laid them side-by-side.

The photos showed an old couple playing with a cute little girl

Pulling Strings

and a puppy. The old man was wearing a traditional *guayabera*²² and dark slacks. The old lady was wearing a dress that went out of style some time in 1974.

The prisoner stopped crying.

“Yeah, we know about them,” Vélez said. He placed the photos back into the folder, grabbed the folder and the laptop and left the interrogation room. A guard brought the prisoner back to his cell, ordered him to strip and left with the jumpsuit and the shower shoes. A second guard pulled a hose into the cell and once again soaked the prisoner in cold water.

Vélez had been very specific: they would keep him awake (and soaked) for another 24 hours, and then he would be ready to talk. A doctor would check him every 12 hours to make sure the strain would not kill him.

²² A very popular cotton shirt style worn throughout the Caribbean, Central America and also in the Philippines. In Puerto Rico white guayaberas, especially long-sleeved, are accepted as casual business attire.

The first Venezuela-run refinery was shut down the next day. The press had their field day, with live feeds of demonstrators celebrating at the front gates of all of the other refineries still under control of the Venezuelan government. As for the gas stations, they fared worse. Many had already filed for bankruptcy since antitrust laws forbid them from just picking a different distributor.

Chávez denounced it as “an organized attack on the peoples of Venezuela by the imperialist pigs to the north.” The White House, finally breaking the silence, asked Chávez why should he expect to make money in the United States after so many months of nonstop vicious verbal attacks against the country?

This eroded into a continuous back-and-forth war of words between Washington and Caracas, and somehow everyone forgot about the new oil sales deal between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. That was Puerto Rico’s hint to approach Haiti with a similar deal. Haiti was strapped for cash, so they were more than happy for the discount. In exchange they established a commission to study other ways in which both nations could help each other economically. The Dominicans were of course invited to join this group.

Major Ramiro Vélez, CDI, freshly showered and shaved, and for the first time in a while out of uniform, was flown to Salinas in the newly-acquired CDI Eurocopter.

Anywhere else in the world this helicopter would have been assigned to the boss. This is the one place where they give their first helicopter to the guys that actually need it the most.

Vélez walked into the orderly room, which had been turned into a combined guard office and lounge. One guard was asleep in a couch, which was normal practice since some times the remote location of the holding facility forced the guards to pull long shifts. Half of the shift was making rounds, and the rest was scattered

through the orderly room, some eating or reading, and one pair were playing cards.

Nobody looked up when Vélez arrived.

Vélez waited 15 seconds, but still nobody bothered to look up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small cylinder with a grenade fuse attached to one end. It was a training version of a flash bang grenade.

Vélez pulled the pin, let the clasp fall then threw it in the middle of the room as he closed his eyes and whispered “flash bang.”

The grenade was nowhere as powerful as the real deal, but it was loud enough to make everyone jump. The guard that was asleep, who was pretty much the only innocent party, fell off the couch and banged his forehead.

The two card players rolled on the floor and started drawing weapons. Vélez gave the all clear.

The shift leader straightened his shirt, then walked over to the Mayor.

“May the shift leader ask the Major what the fuck was that?”

“Not really. But think what would have happened if that were a real frag²³ grenade. You people are guarding our two most important prisoners, the least you can do is look like you are doing your jobs,” Vélez explained.

“Yes sir.”

“Did you keep him awake like I asked?”

The shift leader smiled.

“Yes sir, and we made sure he has been hydrated properly.”

“What about his health?”

“The doctor says he is about to pass out for good, but mostly he needs to get some sleep.”

“Good, let’s do this.”

Julio César Piccorelli had arrived at the former Ramey Air Force Base in Aguadilla, on the western coast of Puerto Rico. The field had been re-commissioned as a government airport since it was much more private than the Luis Muñoz Marín International Air-

²³ Fragmentation grenade, a metallic ball full of shrapnel and an explosive center. When it blows up the outside metal casing and the shrapnel are turned into deadly projectiles.

port.

On his arrival, he was driven to a safe house a few miles south. He was provided with a very comfortable suite, including a wide screen television with 400 channels of digital cable. His only instructions were to not talk to anyone until CDI personnel arrived for his debriefing.

The safe house was fully stocked with food and drinks (alcohol was not allowed) and most of the guards were very good cooks. Piccorelli was free to eat until he burst.

The next day a CDI briefer arrived and gave Piccorelli a broad explanation of what his next few weeks would be like. He would be moving between secure locations, spending 10 to 15 hours a day talking to expert interrogators. Since Piccorelli's entrance was due to his connections with special projects connected to American defense interests, the interrogations were a necessary evil. Everyone involved understood what was at stake.

Piccorelli of course was in the best of spirits. On the days leading to his departure he had managed to route most of his work files from his office to his condo, and from there to secure servers in Sea Land, a tiny principality founded on an abandoned WWII fortification six miles off the eastern shores of England. From there his files propagated to anonymous servers in Norway, India and The Maldives. Had the Americans managed to trace the files to any of these destinations it would take them months to iron out the diplomatic deals needed before they would be allowed access to any of these servers.

The data had been downloaded to CDI upon Piccorelli's arrival at the safe house, and it had already been used for the briefings.

Major Vélez had a special interest in the process, since he had gone through a very similar experience when he had stolen files from his White House job as US Army sergeant, copied them to his Apple iPod and flew straight to Puerto Rico, where he was immediately commissioned as a Captain in the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico. Since he was tied up elsewhere on CDI-business he had called Piccorelli to welcome him back home and to assure him that they would have a chance to meet as soon as possible.

10

15 miles south of Cabo Rojo, Republic of Puerto Rico

It was not widely known that just because the Americans were gone, that did not mean that everything would change. One of the better ideas that the Americans had in many years was the creation of a radar barrier comprised of small and cheap radar systems mounted on inexpensive blimp balloons. These were anchored along the coasts of the island, providing great coverage for drug shipments (both air and sea) arriving from the south.

The radar picket barrier was augmented by surveillance aircraft. These airplanes were similar in design to the aircraft typically used to track down submarines. These planes, the size and range of a typical turboprop airliner, had MAD²⁴ sensors, sonobuoys²⁵ and surface search radar.

The Cessna had been detected about 45 miles away. Southern Command, who had authority over the southwestern coasts plus Mona Island, had queried it constantly until it was within 20 miles of the coast.

The small plane kept a steady heading but started to lower its cruise height from 10,000 feet to less than 2,000. And they refused to reply.

It was considered to call in the interceptors that were patrolling the Mona Canal, but it was considered overkill. Plus the maritime patrol aircraft (with four turboprop motors) were already twice as fast as the Cessna.

Southern Command decided to send one of the sub hunter planes to chase the Cessna.

As it approached the 10-mile mark, and since the plane refused to answer air control or Southern Command, it was time to try something new.

²⁴ Magnetic Anomaly Detectors, a sensor that could spot the variations on the earth's magnetic fields created by large metallic objects like submarines.

²⁵ A small sonar sensor that is launched from an aircraft. It is connected to a buoy that keeps it at a predefined depth and also houses its radio antenna.

The sub hunter plane was armed with an experimental weapon, courtesy of the geeks at the Caribbean Center for Technology (CCT), the government-sponsored research and development center on the grounds of the Colegio de Mayaguez.

The weapon was simple: it consisted of a metal alloy dart that was shot from a compressed air cannon mounted under the nose of the aircraft. The dart carried only enough energy to pierce the outer skin of an aircraft and stay inside. A time delayed fuse activated a device that generated an electromagnetic pulse. This pulse barely strong enough to fry the electronics aboard the aircraft and hopefully would disrupt the operation of the engine.

If the aircraft had non-electrically actuated control surfaces it would still be able to fly, but without any instruments.

After a last warning, Southern Command approved the use of the pulse dart. The sub hunter plane had been flying port side, so it slowly slipped behind the Cessna and lined up for its shot. The Cessna did not budge.

The sub hunter shot the pulse dart. At first the Cessna did not show any effect, but then it started to wobble a bit. As soon as it started veering to the left it was obvious that the port engine had shut down first. The starboard engine would follow soon.

The Cessna started a slow counterclockwise spin, but eventually the pilot managed to regain control and started a glide path that would hopefully get him to the beach.

FURA had been alerted, and two of their helicopters were circling the most obvious areas for the crash landing. When the Cessna was down to the last mile of its glide path, it was obvious that it was headed for the salt flats just north of the Cabo Rojo lighthouse. One of the FURA helicopters dropped a squad of troopers on the ground, and then dropped their sniper team by the lighthouse, since at the pedestal of the lighthouse they had a great observation platform. The snipers would provide security and close surveillance.

The pilot of the Cessna was obviously skilled. He did not bother retracting his landing gear, instead went for a belly-up landing. The Cessna lost lift as it reached the edge of the salt flats. It then dropped like a rock and slid for about a hundred yards. The second FURA helicopter circled around it while the FURA troops proceed-

ed to surround the plane.

Amazingly, the Cessna was pretty much intact. The pilot stepped outside, hands up in the air. He was quickly frisked and cuffed, then led away.

The passenger was not so lucky; he broke his collarbone and had a nasty bruise on his forehead. After a quick checkup by the FURA combat medic, the passenger/copilot was strapped to a stretcher and carried aboard the second helicopter.

The airplane was crammed with cocaine, but the FURA squad leaders, veterans of the war on drugs, felt that the cocaine bricks felt funny.

One of the squad leaders pulled a small Gerber knife and sliced open one of the cocaine bricks. He was not surprised to see another brick crammed inside. The inner brick was probably pure heroin. The smaller bricks of heroin sold for just a little bit more than the cocaine, but for some reason freelance pilots want to charge more for transporting heroin than cocaine. Because of this some “importers” try to hide their heroin inside cocaine bricks.

The squad leader flipped open his secure cell phone and dialed a number from memory:

“Chief Ruby?”

“Yeah, what do you want?”

“Did you hear about the airplane interdiction down by Cabo Rojo?”

“Yeah. You on that?”

“Yup. They called us at the last second. The plane was crammed with double bricks, cocaine outside, gold heroin inside.”

“What about the crew?”

“The pilot did not get hurt, I don’t think this was his first crash landing. The other dude got banged up, FURA-2 is flying him over to Centro Médico²⁶.”

“Attaboy, that was a good call,” Chief Ruby commended the squad leader. The squad leader did not know he had been added to a very short list of candidates to be recruited to work for CDI.

²⁶ The biggest medical complex in the Republic of Puerto Rico, more or less centered on the School of Medicine of the University of Puerto Rico. Yours truly was born in one of the many hospitals within the Centro Médico complex.

“Anything else you want to know Chief?”

“What do you think? Was the second guy part of the shipment, or do you think he was hitching a ride?” Chief Ruby asked mostly to test the squad leader.

“Well, his clothes were too nice for a dope smuggler. No farmer calluses, and he was a little slinky, so he was not there to help carry the dope.” The squad leader explained.

“Good catch sergeant, we’ll talk more later. I’ll make sure that there is CDI personnel waiting to meet your chopper.”

It took the squad leader (a corporal) a few seconds to realize that he had received an on-the-spot promotion. Chief Ruby did not have promotion authority, but he was known to reward quick thinkers by whispering the right word in the right ear.

The FURA flight never made it to the Centro Médico. As soon as Chief Ruby hung up, he called FURA flight operations (at the Ribas Dominicci airport) and ordered the flight diverted to the old Sabana Seca Naval Base²⁷, on the western edge of the San Juan Metro area.

Since Major Vélez was still in Salinas, it was up to Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby to drive to Sabana Seca and interrogate the passenger/copilot, that is, if he was either of these.

²⁷ Sabana Seca was landlocked; so instead of officially calling it a “Naval” Base it was usually referred to as a “Naval Security” Group. On December 3, 1979, the Macheteros terrorist group gunned down a US Navy bus with 18 unarmed technicians on their way to work at the AN/FLR-9 “Elephant” Cage antenna array just a mile or so from my elementary school (I was 8 at the time). Two US Marines died in the attack, and another 10 sailors were wounded, including 3 women.

11

**Fort Allen,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Major Vélez prepared his prisoner for the upcoming “interview” by sending him a full weight American style breakfast with eggs, bacon, ham, coffee, steamed milk and fresh orange juice. Once the prisoner was done eating, a guard arrived to clean the table. He did not cuff the prisoner again.

Vélez walked in and sat in front of his prisoner.

“I just want to get this out of the way,” Vélez started. “The reason for whatever we did to you is for putting my guys on that god damn wild goose chase for half a fucking week. I don’t have the time or resources to waste them on petty bullshit like what you did.”

The prisoner did not reply.

“We are professionals, and we are proud of the job we are trusted with doing. Don’t fuck around with us again and we’ll treat you better than at Club Fed.”

“That’s fair.”

It was the first thing that the prisoner had said all day. He did not even say thanks when his food was delivered, probably because he was afraid they would either poison him or lace his food with a strong laxative.

“OK, explain this to me. We know who you are, and we know what you do. Why the fuck would you risk all that to come here? Did you honestly think we would not catch you?” Vélez asked.

“Do you really think you know everything?”

“Sure I do. I know you are really Cuban, not Puerto Rican. I know you were Filiberto’s control officer in Tallahassee, and I know you are about to get in a hell of a lot of trouble for disobeying the orders of your boss. Yeah, your real boss, the old guy with the beard and the cigars.”

“Shit.”

“Yes, shit. You are in deep shit. We already knew. Just because we did not release everything to the tracking teams it doesn’t mean we

did not know for sure." Vélez was enjoying himself.

"What else do you know?" The prisoner asked.

"Well, the little girl is not really your daughter. Her mother already paid for the DNA tests herself just to be safe, probably with the money you send her every month. And yeah, while you are here she is still seeing the real father."

"Liar."

"The test is legitimate. The hospital had taken DNA samples when she was born, as a security measure. Her birth sample matches the samples used for the paternity test."

"How did I get ruled out?"

"She kept your old hair brush, and some hairs still had skin tags. Piece of cake."

"That fucking whore!"

"Hey, calm down. That's none of our business, I am only telling you to prove you how well informed we are."

"So what happens to me now?"

"Easy. Talk to us and cooperate. Don't ask us about Filiberto, that video that you saw doesn't exist."

"In the news they said that the FBI shot and killed him in front of his wife."

"I never took you for the kind of guy that would believe everything he saw on the news."

Julio César Piccorelli had finished his debriefing. He was wondering when he would get to meet the mysterious Major Vélez from CDI, but his handlers had explained that things had flared up a bit and Vélez was a bit busier than the norm.

Right as Piccorelli was wondering what the hell was going to happen to him, one of the handlers walked in and handed him a cell phone.

Piccorelli raised an eyebrow: it was the first time he had been explicitly allowed to use a phone since his arrival in the island.

"Who's this?"

"This is Major Vélez, ARPR."

"I was starting to think you were some kind of ghost."

Vélez chuckled.

Pulling Strings

“Nah, I am a regular guy just like you. We are almost the same age and all, the main difference is our lines of work are a little bit different.”

“So what happens to me now?”

“Easy. You got four choices.”

“I am listening.”

“One: you come work for us at CDI. I am ready to offer you a non-rated commission as a First Lieutenant, ARPR.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you carry officer rank but you cannot command. You will be a staff officer.”

“What’s the second?”

“You work for us as a civilian. We’ll send you to CCT to stay busy, and we’ll pull you in whenever we need you. We’ll name you the liaison officer to the CCT to explain your absences.”

“Sounds interesting. What’s three?”

“Quiet retirement. We pay you a modest pension, and we’ll give you title to a family-sized home anywhere in the island. In exchange for the pension we reserve the right to call on you in very rare occasions.”

“Uhm. What’s left?”

“Nothing,” Vélez replied. If you don’t take any of our three very generous offers, I am afraid you will disappear.”

Piccorelli almost replied “bullshit” but decided to hold it at the last second.

“I would love to take the retirement, but I am too young and ambitious. I would get bored to death.”

“Yeah, you will.”

“I have never been too big into the whole discipline thing, so I’ll go with the CCT gig.”

“Good choice, we knew you were not cut for the Army. You’ll love CCT.”

Aguas Buenas, Republic of Puerto Rico

The traditional Puerto Rican home is based on a simple and proved design. The foundations are concrete reinforced with steel bars and there is no basement. The floors are marble or very polished granite tiles. The walls are hollow cinder blocks with steel-reinforced columns and covered with a thin and smooth layer of cement. Most people opt for aluminum blinds²⁸ but some actually use tempered glass blinds. The roof is flat reinforced concrete. There are thousands of variations, but most of the times the basic design is followed.

This traditional construction technique was perfect for an island cursed with terrible hurricanes. Only the poor built with wood and used corrugated tin sheets for the roofing. Hurricanes easily shredded these houses.

That is, until the breakthrough.

The most popular supplier of pressure-treated construction wood decided to experiment with prefabricated homes. His initial prototypes looked modern and were extremely sturdy. Just for the hell of it he sent a few crated houses to be assembled in the islands of Vieques and Culebra, east of the island of Puerto Rico and right on the path of most hurricane tracks. When Hurricane Hugo struck Puerto Rico in 1989, it almost razed every wooden house in Culebra Island. The two test houses were left untouched. The new design worked.

When William Roth became the first president of the Republic of Puerto Rico, he put into action a series of social programs aimed at providing fair housing to all Puerto Rican residents. Shantytowns were razed and the residents moved to new houses where they would not pay rent or mortgage. After 30 years the title would pass on to the owner. Selling the property or using it as an investment property was enough evidence for the owner to lose any hope at

²⁸ Everyone calls them "Miami" blinds.

gaining title of the home.

President Roth paid for the first 500 homes out of his own pocket, since the oil drilling had barely started. His supplier of choice was the pressure treated wood supplier that had designed the hurricane-proof prefabricated houses.

President Roth was so impressed with the concept that he had commissioned the company to build him a middle-sized house on the hills of Aguas Buenas. On a clear day it was possible to see all the way to the Old San Juan fortresses. The “house” was used so the Roth family had a nice and quiet place to spend their weekends. During the week it was used for official functions and for special meetings. The area was so densely vegetated that it was nearly impossible to spot the house from the distance. Its private driveway curved around a mountain so the house could not be seen from the road. A team of former US Secret Service agents plus a few FURA and ARPR personnel provided security. CDI was in charge of protecting the location from electronic eavesdropping.

The location was perfect for the economic summit talks between Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica. Cuba had asked for non-official presence at the meetings. After some haggling and a bribe consisting of very fine Cuban cigars (Roth loved to smoke cigars), the Puerto Ricans sneaked in the deputy of Castro’s Ministry of Finances. When asked about the quiet character, the state department personnel explained that the man was an economics theorist from the University of Puerto Rico.

On the day of the meeting the Prime Minister of Haiti, the President of the Dominican Republic and the Prime Minister of Jamaica arrived in identical unmarked (and heavily armored) Range Rovers. Neither had a police escort to avoid unnecessary attention.

President Roth arrived two hours later, in a CDI Suburban driven by Chief Ruby and with Captain Arocho riding shotgun. President Roth and The Admiral rode in the back.

While it was understandable for the Prime Ministers and President to bring their security details, President Roth convinced them that their security was not in question. The chiefs of security of each delegation were allowed to stick around with Roth’s own security detail. All other foreign security personnel were assigned to ride

along their Puerto Rican counterparts.

The agenda was simple: the four heads of state would meet in a relaxed environment, which is why the meeting was being held at Roth's country house instead of a more formal setting. Puerto Rico was a new nation as far as the visitors were concerned. There were no bad memories or betrayals and any differences between the visitors were not Puerto Rico's business.

As for Cuba's representative, since he was passing as a Puerto Rican delegate he was not invited to the actual talks, only to the side briefings.

The heads of state talked for five hours straight and without any outside interruptions. They had a small buffet with fresh fruit, pastries, bread, fruit juice and coffee. They also had a bathroom with no exterior walls, and CDI had installed cell phone jammers. Roth did not want his guests to have any external assistance.

The talks went as predicted by Roth's staff. Puerto Rico was giving, and it was up to their neighbors to take it. The oil discounts were just the beginning.

After the five hours, the four men shook hands, hugged and simply parted ways. There were no press announcements or follow-up talks.

As soon as the last car had left the house, Roth heard shouting. He looked at The Admiral (who had listened to all five hours of talks from a separate room) and Major Vélez (who had stayed with the staffers outside.

Both shrugged their shoulders, so neither had a clue about the commotion. After a few seconds, the source of the ruckus was evident: the Cuban delegate was throwing a fit.

Roth signaled for Vélez to check what the hell was going on. After a couple of minutes Vélez was back, with the Cuban delegate in tow.

"Mister President, let me introduce Rogelio Sáenz, of the Cuban Ministry of Finance. Mister Sáenz, the President of the Republic of Puerto Rico."

"It's an honor, Presidente."

"It isn't. Your name is not Rogelio Sáenz, and you don't work for Finance. You are Antonio Landrón, and you work for Internal Security."

“Mister Presidente, I am awed.”

Busted! thought Vélez.

The Admiral cursed to himself.

“Tell Castro that everything went according to plan.”

“Mister Presidente, I am confused. You know Fidel Castro?”
Sáenz/Landrón asked.

“Who the hell do you think gave me your real identity?”

**San Juan,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

President Roth was a firm believer in the concept of the media blitz. *Hit them hard and hit them with everything you got.*

President Roth started the press conference by announcing that the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica had signed open trade agreements with the Republic of Puerto Rico. The first item in the agreement: oil. Haiti and Jamaica would enjoy the same discounted rates as the ones negotiated by the Dominican Republic just a few weeks earlier.

In addition, Roth announced the creation of the first satellite campuses of the CCT in each country. These satellite centers would act as clearinghouses for technologies created and patented by the Republic of Puerto Rico. Each of the three countries had signed bulk-licensing agreements that allowed any of their citizens to use a Puerto Rican technology patent for one dollar per year.

The press room erupted. Roth let them make as much noise as they wanted. After about ten minutes he asked them to shut up so he could continue.

On cue his press secretary started handing out information packages that described the new economic deals in great detail.

Roth refused to answer any questions on the patent licensing. At least two reporters tried to ask about rumors that a deal had been made with Cuba. Roth again refused to answer.

Then Roth dropped the bomb. He announced a ten-year engineering collaboration between the four nations. The target? New high-speed rail networks crisscrossing the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Jamaica and Puerto Rico would get the same kind of network at a smaller scale. The right-of-way for these rail lines would also include buried optical fiber, power lines and cell phone towers, effectively making sure every resident of these countries would have access to electricity, telephony services and high speed Internet ac-

cess. All paid by the Republic of Puerto Rico. Residents of these countries in the lower 95% income bracket would receive these services for free.

The press room erupted even worse. Again, on cue, the press secretary handed out more information packages.

In the rear, The Admiral and Major Vélez, both with their fingers crossed behind their backs, wondered how the hell they were going to pull it off.

The world had very varied reactions to the announcements, but so far the overall reaction was good. Puerto Rico was taking its economic leadership to new levels, and this kind of generosity towards other nations (outside of the occasional natural disaster relief aid) has not been seen since the reconstruction plans after WWII.

Germany and Japan had enthusiastically endorsed the plans, and promised their own very generous support packages. Both Germany and Japan committed to send engineering students to the satellite CCT campuses for one-year apprenticeships, plus metric tons of electronic gear including cell phones, laptop computers and electronic rail control systems.

The Americans were not as enthusiastic. They felt a little embarrassed at their reaction because they felt almost as if they were jealous of the success of their former territory. Plus the torture of knowing they had been sitting on all that oil for over 100 years and never even suspected it.

The oil deal was a strategic problem. It gave all these countries a lot of cash to spend on other things. It also put Puerto Rico in too good a position, a position that only an idiot would pass on. The Americans had no delusions about Roth: they knew he was not stupid.

The infrastructure and patent issues were also strategic, but only from a perverted angle. It was as if Puerto Rico wanted to tell everyone else that they had plenty of hard cash to spend and was not afraid to use it. At this pace Puerto Rico could easily buy the favor of most of the Caribbean basin before the end of the decade.

If Puerto Rico were to extend just the patent licensing to Mexico, it would create an economic boom that would probably slow down illegal migration into the United States. A good thing for Mexico,

but a bad thing for the Americans that were too used to a steady supply of cheap labor.

And of course, Venezuela was having a fit. Things got worse when President Roth ordered his staff to stop taking phone calls from President Chávez of Venezuela. Venezuelan journalists were given free access to the Roth administration, and these reporters went back home to write about how great things were in the island paradise.

Hugo Chávez replied by throwing them in jail, hoping Roth would try to meddle by asking him to release them from jail. This is exactly what Major Vélez had predicted, to The Admiral's mild annoyance. Roth did not say a word, and eventually Chávez ordered the journalists released once he figured out that Roth would not take the bait.

14

Cuba

Officially, nothing stopped Puerto Ricans from traveling to Cuba. In reality, Puerto Rico had to pay lip service to the Americans longstanding blockade on Cuba, so they could not simply hop on a plane and fly to Havana without at least some bullshit excuse.

Because of this Puerto Rico had not yet attempted direct commercial flights between San Juan and Havana. And that was a problem for both Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby.

President Roth wanted them to run an errand for him.

The real problem was the air search radars at the US Navy Base at Guantánamo Bay, and at the Florida Cays. It would be impossible to sneak a conventional aircraft into Cuba without the Americans knowing about it.

Chief Ruby came up with a simple solution: Arocho and Chief Ruby would fly to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to help set-up the first CCT satellite campus. Ruby expected the Americans to tail them, so at the very last second they would sneak out across the border into Haiti. Elements of the Haiti security service would meet them and fly them into Cuba aboard a Haitian military cargo plane on a training mission.

The return trip would be much simpler: a commercial flight to Yucatán, Mexico, then a direct flight to San Juan.

At the last second The Admiral insisted on sending three pairs of decoys. To both Arocho and Chief Ruby's amusement, they actually managed to find enough people to act as these extra decoys. They even had plenty of time for a standard security briefing.

The decoys were spread across the three flights that would carry the initial delegation from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby took separate flights to try to spot any kind of external surveillance.

The flights went without a hitch.

Captain Arocho arrived on the last flight. By the time he had finished clearing customs (he was carrying a diplomatic passport and his briefcase was considered a sealed diplomatic pouch) he saw that the rest of the delegation had not been picked up yet. Chief Ruby was talking to one of the flight attendants, probably trying to get her phone number.

Arocho walked across the terminal, looking around while he tried his best to act like a lost passenger. And then he saw it.

The doors were dark polished wood, with brass accents. No signs or numbers to be seen anywhere. The door itself was beautifully carved in a floral pattern. Upon close inspection Arocho noticed a tiny camera lens embedded into the door.

He could not see a buzzer button, and right as he was about to knock on the door, the most gorgeous woman that Arocho had seen in ages opened it. The goddess (he had no other way to describe her) seemed to be talking to him, but he was too concentrated on the way her lips moved.

“Are you deaf or just stupid?” She asked.

“Uhm, what? Sorry, it was a long flight.”

“Captain, you flew for 30 minutes, what the hell are you talking about?”

Great God, what a babe!

“Never mind. I guess you already know who I am, but I have no clue who the hell are you.”

“I am Agent Lucy Ramos, Internal Security Service.”

“Funny, you don’t look Latin.”

“My mom was German.”

Thank you, Jesus!

“Interesting, so what do we do now? Can I buy you lunch?”

“It’s not even mid morning!”

“Breakfast then?”

“You are terrible! Come on in, we reserved one of the dining rooms in the club.”

Chief Ruby was not as lucky. His briefing officer was a 75-year old grandmother type that reminded him too much of President Roth’s legendary secretary.

Pulling Strings

The briefer even brought him home baked cookies.

Right around lunchtime each of the delegation teams was driven to undisclosed locations around the airport. The CCT teams were reconstituted and taken to the CCT campus outside of Santo Domingo, minus Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby, who were then driven to the Haiti border by Lucy Ramos in her beat up Volkswagen Beetle.

Agent Ramos greeted her Haitian counterpart by first name. Obviously the security services of the neighboring countries were in good terms.

Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby were driven away in a Mercedes sedan with government license plates. They drove a few kilometers in country to a clearing, where an ancient Sikorsky H-19 helicopter was waiting to transfer them to the military airport in Jeremie, on the lower Haiti peninsula. From Jeremie they transferred to a Pilatus PC-12 that usually flew to Havana and back on a bi-weekly schedule.

The Pilatus landed in an abandoned airfield that had been built by the Russians more than 30 years ago.

"I thought we were going to land at the international airport," whispered Chief Ruby.

"Shit, that's what I thought too."

The front hatch was opened from the outside, and as they were unhooking their safety belts and reaching for their briefcases on the overhead storage bins, they heard heavy steps climbing up.

Chief Ruby and Captain Arocho slowly turned around.

"Hello," said Rogelio Sáenz of Cuban Internal Security. "Welcome to Cuba, you two are under arrest."

Mona Island, Republic of Puerto Rico

During the commonwealth years, Mona Island had been designated as a natural reserve and it had been declared off limits except for officially sanctioned scientific activities. After the creation of the Republic, the status had not changed, but its strategic location was too good to pass. Mona Island was soon turned into a secret research and development facility managed by CDI and staffed mostly by CCT personnel and engineering students from the Colegio de Mayaguez.

It was from Mona Island that CDI had the proper long-range detection gear that was sensible enough to pick up the signals broadcast from the transponders carried in both Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby's briefcases. The transponders read their GPS location and broadcast it as an encrypted burst, which was then picked up by the long-range sensor array in the island.

CDI did not suspect that there was anything wrong until the very last minute, when the Haitian airplane started its landing procedures a few degrees off the approach to the international airport at Havana.

The shift leader immediately called the CDI operations center in Fort Buchanan, where Major Vélez was running the operation. The Admiral was at La Fortaleza²⁹ with President Roth. Vélez elected to break protocol by not calling The Admiral with the news. After all, he could not bring himself to trust his encrypted cell phone as much as the CDI nerds expected him to.

Vélez told his assistant that he was going to be out for a few hours, then drove his assigned ARPR Humvee to his on-base housing unit, a nice little house that 20 or so years ago would have been part of Colonel's Row³⁰. Now most of the houses on his street were

²⁹ Palace of Santa Catalina, popularly known as "The Fortress," the traditional home for Puerto Rican governors.

³⁰ On any US Army base the nicest houses don't go to the Generals. The top General usually lives in quarters #1, which can be anything from a claustrophobic

assigned to Lieutenants and Captains working for CDI. Almost everyone else had taken mortgages in the suburbs of San Juan.

Vélez changed out of his uniform and less than 10 minutes later he was back on the road, this time on his personal car, a 1980 Toyota Corolla. He drove north to the Cataño coastline, and parked close to the aqua bus³¹ pier. He paid for his ticket and took the boat to the cruise ship piers. From the piers it was a short walk to the White House.

The guards knew him by sight and waved them in. He replied by giving them a forceful lecture on proper security procedures, and that nobody, not even Roth himself, was to be waved across a security checkpoint without the proper credentials.

As he made his way to the presidential apartments he felt like maybe he had been too harsh with the guards, but at the same time Vélez had always shown very low tolerance for incompetence.

Vélez used his own pass card to activate the entrance to the apartment. The guards on the other side had already checked him through the concealed video cameras so they just waved him in.

Major Vélez knocked on the door to the president's private office.

"Come," Roth said, his voice sort of booming.

Vélez stepped into the office.

"Mister President, Admiral, we have a problem."

"Did your guys get arrested?" Roth asked.

"Yes sir, they did."

Roth stared at The Admiral, who did not budge. Then he raised his eyebrows, but The Admiral stood his ground.

"Jesus Christ, would you grow up?" Roth asked him.

Vélez was clueless.

The Admiral stood up, pulled out his wallet and handed President Roth a crisp \$5 bill.

"OK, you win. I don't know how the fuck you did it, but you won

dump to a glorious southern classic mansion. Any other General will do his damndest best to find a decent house outside of the base. Colonel's Row is the street with the nicest "normal" housing, and those usually go to the Colonels and maybe one lucky Major.

³¹ The aqua bus was just that, a "bus" line that ran catamaran boats from Cataño to Hato Rey and to the cruise ship piers in Old San Juan, just across from the bay.

it fair and square.”

Both Roth and The Admiral stared at Vélez, then at each other and ended up laughing.

Roth waved him to sit down.

“Son, I knew this was going to happen. It is part of the plan. I bet you can even guess who arrested him.”

The Admiral nodded, go ahead son, say something stupid, blow it for good.

“Sir, I think it is Rogelio Sáenz.”

Roth stood up and handed Vélez the \$5 bill. The Admiral was beaming.

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“Mister President, as you know we have some of the country’s greatest intellectuals on call just in case we need somebody to bounce ideas off.”

Roth nodded.

“After the incident at the summit, I called in some of our international politics experts and had them write a white paper on Cuba. When I read the results I found the highest security classification rating I could find and I buried it until we needed it.”

“You did not think we would be interested in it?” The Admiral asked. He sounded irritated.

“The initial paper was my excuse for the real investigation, which is still underway. I wanted to make sure that my control group, a second group of political experts, did not read it. I sent sealed copies of the paper to be hidden at both of your personal safes.”

“Attaboy,” the Admiral commended Vélez. “Do we need to read that now or can you give us a quick summary?”

“The short story is that some far right elements in Cuba are not happy with whatever is it that is going on between us and Cuba. These people are under the illusion that Castro is weak and that they can get rid off him and force us to deal with them instead.”

“If they think Castro is weak, then they are both dangerous and stupid,” Roth replied. “That old goat is probably in better health than any other head of state in his age bracket.”

“Do we agree that Rogelio Sáenz is acting on his own?” The Admiral asked.

Pulling Strings

Both Roth and Vélez answered yes.

“Do we deal with this on our own? Or do we cut him in?”

“I would try on my own, but it won’t work,” answered Vélez,

“Why?” Asked Roth.

“We have no expertise on Cuba.”

“Is that it? What else?” Roth asked impatiently.

“Because we can use this situation to solidify our relationship with Castro.”

Roth smiled.

“You are correct. We could do this ourselves, but it would pay off better if we help Castro deal with it.”

Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby were taken to a small police station, not too far from Guantánamo Bay. Both men were placed in the same holding cell.

Both Arocho and Ruby had interviewed Cuban refugees while pulling duty at SOC Headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, and they still remembered their horror stories about the Cuban jails.

The first thing that did not make sense was that they were never cuffed. Instead they were escorted by armed guards that were at all time respectful, almost as if they were embarrassed of having to keep them in custody.

Every few hours an orderly brought them warm food. They guessed it had been ordered from a restaurant, or had come from an officer’s mess somewhere in the area.

The guards left a crate of water bottled in small plastic bottles right outside of their cell but still within their grasp. They were instructed to retrieve one bottle at a time and to place the empty bottles back in the crate. If they failed to follow these simple instructions they would have to drink water from the sink faucet.

Both men expected the cell to be wired with microphones and fiber optics cameras, so they tried to stay silent for as long as they could. If they got bored they would talk about movies and television.

The Cubans made no attempt at interrogating them.

President Roth dismissed The Admiral and Major Vélez, and then asked his secretary to place the call on an unsecured line. He want-

ed to make sure the Americans would intercept it, even if only to drive them insane.

“Mister President, your call is ready.”

Roth grabbed the phone.

“President Castro, how are you feeling today?”

“Very good, thank you so much for asking. How about you? Your family?”

“Everybody is great, thank you. Willie is going to graduate early, then I am betting he’ll shoot for an Army commission.”

“You must be very proud.”

“I am. President Castro, it is happening as we speak.”

“Oh yes? Was it Rogelio Sáenz? Or should I call him Landrón?”

“For all we know, neither is his real name. But yes, it was him. He had people with the Haitians; they waited until the very last second to divert the flight.”

“Do you know where?”

“Both men were bugged, if they are still wearing their clothes then we know where they are.”

“Why don’t we leave this to the professionals? Have your task force call Cuban Army Directorate 12, they have the number already.”

“We’ll do President Castro, thank you so much for your understanding.”

“No, thank you William. You are doing a good thing. We need to get rid off the banana republic mentality if we want Latin America to pull itself out of poverty. I am impressed with how much you have managed in so little time. What a shame that you won’t consider Communism.”

Castro hung up.

Roth used his encrypted cell phone to call The Admiral.

“Cuban Army Directorate 12,” Roth said.

“Shit.”

“Shit what?”

“That’s the one Vélez predicted. Our guys are ready to talk to them, we were waiting on you.”

“The sonofabitch is more times right than wrong. How long before you can promote our Major Vélez?”

Pulling Strings

“Immediately, if you want me to. I would like to wait until we are done, that way it won’t distract him.”

“OK, approved. Vélez is a Lieutenant Colonel as soon as this mess is sorted out.”

MacDill Air Force Base, Florida

MacDill Air Force Base was the long time home of the United States Special Operations Command (SOC), the umbrella organization that controls all “irregular” forces in the United States, like the US Army Special Forces, the US Navy Seals and US Air Force Air Commandos. It was also an operational base, and many times it was used as the launching point for operations that spanned the globe.

As soon as President Roth had announced all of his economic policies in cooperation with the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica, the powers-that-be started cranking out intelligence estimates requests on the whole intelligence community. The Special Operations Community does its best to maintain cordial relations with all intelligence agencies, since once everything is said and done, their lives depended on the reliability of the Intel weenies. The feeling was mutual, so the special operators could always count on a friendly heads up whenever they felt trouble was stirring.

Less than a week earlier, the word had come from CIA, NSA and NRO that there was an increased interest in anything they had going around the Greater Antilles area. SOC G2 (operations) proceeded to dust off all of their old plans for Cuban operations. They also called the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions for any plans they had that could apply to Caribbean operations.

SOC increased their training tempo, which immediately meant canceling all classroom time and sending everyone out to the field. Everyone knew it was bullshit, since the United States was still too busy dealing with Afghanistan and Iraq. There was no way in hell they could support a third major engagement.

SOC G2 knew this as well, but for them it meant that the Pentagon would have to use SOC assets instead of conventional military forces, so they started drawing plans for limited actions in each country, including Puerto Rico and Cuba. Cuba had no part on the

dealing, but only if you still believed in the Tooth Fairy. As for Puerto Rico, they decided to do it out of frustration for losing so many well-trained Puerto Rican personnel when Roth started his exodus bonus programs.

One of the benefits of having the full attention of the intelligence community was that they no longer needed to beg for preferred access to things like satellite photos and communications intercepts.

It did not take much effort to intercept the phone call between President Roth and Fidel Castro. It was so easy that for 12 hours NSA and CIA argued about the possibility that the call was some kind of cruel decoy to keep them busy. Since the word from above was to act on all intelligence collected, they had no choice but to assume it was legitimate.

The preparations for the rescue operation were already underway. Cuban Army Directorate 12 was a small special operations outfit modeled on the Soviet Spetsnaz³² model. Their political reliability was virtually guaranteed, which is why CDI suspected that they were elected for the job.

The Directorate 12 planners immediately found (and took over) a police compound near Havana with an almost identical layout to the station where Ruby and Arocho were being held. Architectural plans were faxed to CDI, which quickly converted them into a real time three-dimensional computer model that allowed them to do a virtual walk-through of the building and surrounding area.

The Directorate 12 troops started practicing entrance drills while CDI worked on providing them with as much intelligence support as possible. CDI set up a direct data link to the Directorate 12 operations center, and continuously sent them real time satellite imagery (purchased from a French satellite company with credit cards that traced back to Swiss banks) and communications intercepts.

They could have easily used their own imagery satellite, but they did not want to risk it so early.

Captain Arocho and Chief Ruby were bored out of their minds. All they did was sit in their jail cells and kill time between meals. Every hour somebody would come in and take their picture with a

³² *Spetsialnoye nazranie* or “troops of special” purpose, the special operations forces of the former Warsaw Pact and the Russian Federation.

digital camera. Arocho guessed that the photos documented their physical state, as if they were scared of being blamed for anything happening to either men.

Arocho was struggling to memorize as much about his surroundings as he could. He assumed he would have an opportunity to take advantage of his captors, so every detail was vital. As for Chief Ruby, he was not worried since he had a near photographic memory.

After about a day, Rogelio Sáenz came to visit them at their cell.

After some idle chat, Arocho lost his patience and asked him to stop bullshitting them and get on with the program.

"OK, if you must insist," replied Sáenz.

"What the fuck is going on? We came here on an official state mission, why did you arrest us?" Captain Arocho asked.

"Some of us feel that Mister Castro has outlived his usefulness. It is time for a new regime."

"I knew you were stupid, but suicidal too? You can't pull that one off!" Arocho replied.

"Oh, trust me, sure we can. And we will. Our only problem so far is that your president keeps getting his nose where it doesn't belong."

Both Arocho and Chief Ruby shrugged their shoulders. Ruby couldn't help but smile.

"Do you know the difference between strategic surprise and tactical surprise?" Ruby asked.

"Why don't you tell me, smart ass?"

"All you have achieved by arresting us is tactical surprise. For all you know, we are the decoys and somebody else has already talked to Castro. That means we still have the strategic surprise."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Chief Ruby held up his hand before Arocho could reply.

"May I?"

Arocho nodded.

"Since we got strategic surprise on our side, it means we will succeed, regardless of what you do. You cannot offset a strategic development simply by arresting two messengers."

"What if I kill Fidel first?"

Pulling Strings

"You can't kill Fidel," explained Chief Ruby. "Fidel is going to die of extremely old age. The only possible way to deal with Fidel Castro is political, and you can't do it."

"I can help you with whatever it is you are trying to do."

"Sorry, we are not hiring anymore. But that's OK, we'll keep your resume on file for a year," Arocho replied.

"You don't think I can be of use?"

"You don't even know what the hell we are doing here," Chief Ruby said.

"What if I just walk you outside and put a bullet on each of your heads?"

"Wouldn't make a difference," Chief Ruby replied. "They will just keep going without us. We are expendable."

Rogelio Sáenz looked at Captain Arocho, who simply nodded.

Mona Island, Republic of Puerto Rico

The CCT monitoring station at Mona Island had now received the voice recordings from the Aguas Buenas summit, which meant they had a very good sample of Rogelio Sáenz's voice that could be used while processing voice intercepts.

While the CCT sensor arrays were doing their part, the problem was that terabytes of raw data were being collected and in need of extremely intensive post-processing.

Julio César Piccorelli, now head of "special" projects at CCT, was leading the effort to setting up a virtual supercomputer with a cluster of inexpensive computers. These computers used massive parallel processing software to replicate the performance of the multi-million dollar supercomputers used by the American NSA, but at a fraction of the cost.

Piccorelli had experimented with clustering while working in Virginia, and he had already shown a proof-of-concept prototype with a 16-node cluster. The production model of the cluster would have 512 computers interconnected and working in parallel.

Piccorelli was enjoying himself in his new role in the scheme of things when Major Vélez decided to make his life hell by telling him about Cuba.

Piccorelli was no longer pleased with himself. An hour ago he was working on an intellectual exercise, something to keep himself entertained. Now he had been told that if he could not crack the collected signals at least two Puerto Rican soldiers could possibly die.

Rogelio Sáenz kept on his visits to the guardhouse, but he never got much out of either Arocho or Chief Ruby. After three days of getting nowhere, he felt he needed help.

Sáenz stepped outside of the guardhouse until he was sure to be out of the hearing range of the guards that were smoking out front. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number in Tallahassee. From Tallahassee it was bounced off to Frankfort, Kentucky, and fi-

nally arrived at Leesburg, Virginia.

"We got a problem," Sáenz said.

"You are not supposed to call me here."

"You told me to call you if there was a problem."

"If you did your job right, you wouldn't need to be calling me."

Sáenz resisted the urge to scream. He was starting to feel the beginning of a migraine.

"I think we arrested the decoys."

"No, you arrested the right two guys. Not that it matters, there were hundreds of flights that day. For all we know they had a pair on each flight and the message has been delivered already."

"You need to get me the hell out of here."

"Check your glove box, there should be a red yellow envelope inside. Follow the instructions."

Sáenz hung up and walked to his car. He almost ran to it.

As promised, there was a yellow envelope in his glove box. It instructed him on the location of his extraction point.

The call was intercepted at the same time by both the NSA and by CDI. The NSA had the advantage since they had broken the weak encryption used in Cuban cellular networks long ago. Less than an hour later they knew everything that they needed. It would take Piccorelli another 6 hours before he could crack the call.

NSA sent their "take" to both CIA and SOC G2. G2 for once did not throw a fit. They had a team prepositioned team at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, and it felt good that for once they had done the right thing.

The prepositioned action team was comprised of a half dozen US Navy Seals, with a US Army Special Forces communications specialist (their assigned signalman had broken a leg in training less than a week ago) and about a company of Marine riflemen acting as a support element.

The plan was simple: the rendezvous would happen close to one of the abandoned roads that led to Guantánamo. The strike team would be able to penetrate Cuban territory (which was riddled with electronic motion sensors) and grab Sáenz before his extraction team arrived. He would be taken back to Guantánamo and immediately flown back to the states. Some had proposed to use the same

cells used for the Al-Qaeda prisoners, but there were too many reporters and International Red Cross people crawling around.

Much easier to fly him to MacDill.

And the Marines? As insurance in case the strike team got detected and got chased back into the base.

Piccorelli cursed. It had taken him close to six hours to break the encryption in the phone call, and this was with the help of the full 512-node cluster. He made a mental note to ask for funding to expand the cluster by at least another 1,024 nodes.

Piccorelli cursed again and called the CDI operations center in San Juan, hoping that Major Vélez was still awake.

"You crack it?" Vélez sounded cranky.

"Yes, he called somebody in Virginia. He claimed that he had arrested the wrong pair and he wanted to be extracted. He was instructed to go to his car and pick an envelope with instructions for his extraction."

"In other words, we don't know how the fuck he is going to get pulled out of Cuba, right?"

"Exactly."

"What are the odds that the NSA already cracked this call hours ago?"

"Odds? I say there is no way in hell that they did not crack that call."

"Which means the god damn Americans are going to snatch that sorry sack of shit before we have a chance to. God dammit."

Piccorelli heard something break; probably Vélez threw his coffee mug across the room or something like that.

"By the way, I can cut the crack time in half, problem is I need twice as many machines."

"Done. Call technical services and ask for whatever you need. I want you to be able to crack one of these in one hour, not one fucking minute longer."

Vélez hung up before Piccorelli could give him his thanks for the additional funding.

18

**North of Guantánamo Bay,
Cuba**

Rogelio Sáenz drove his 35-year old, Russian-built Lada police car to a spot a mile away from the rendezvous point. He left the keys in the ignition and walked away.

He made no attempt at hiding the car.

Sáenz walked (although he wanted to run) along the prescribed path, an old footpath used by farm workers on the way to the sugar cane fields. After the second bend in the road he walked across the field until he made it to the tool shed at the far end. His instructions were to wait there until he was picked up.

The strike team had stationed a sniper across from the field, from where he could watch the whole field, the approaching road and even the tool shed. The rest of the team was scattered in the area around the shed.

As soon as Sáenz made it to the shed, one of the Navy Seals shot him with a tranquilizer dart.

Sáenz went down like a rock.

Two of the strike team members carried him away while the Special Forces communications specialist called in to report they had their man. The sniper stayed behind as security.

Right as the whole team crossed back inside the US Navy base, the communications specialist pulled out a cell phone and called the local Cuban Police constabulary to report that he had seen four gringos in a tool shed off by a sugar cane field. Sáenz, still unconscious, was stripped from his Cuban uniform and was dressed in US Marine utilities. His haircut would have never passed muster, so they simply shaved off his head.

Right around the time that Sáenz was carried aboard the regularly scheduled medical evacuation flight, the Cuban cops stormed into the shed, where they found the four Americans, blindfolded, gagged and bound with duct tape.

The four men were civilian contractors, and had been hired by an

anonymous source to pick up somebody at that precise spot. They were not carrying money or passports, and they did not know who hired them to do the extraction. The Cubans arrested the Americans and dragged them away.

The Cuban Army Directorate 12 operation was much less dramatic. They opted for simply driving up to the police station, getting Arocho and Ruby out of the cell and taking the policemen at the station for "questioning."

Neither Captain Arocho nor Chief Ruby wanted to imagine what that questioning would look like.

Directorate 12 personnel drove Arocho and Chief Ruby to the presidential palace, where they met behind doors with Fidel Castro. After 45 minutes, they were driven to the international airport, under heavy police escort. They were flown straight to San Juan on President Roth's personal jet.

Rogelio Sáenz, now awake and sore as hell, was given a checkup by the SOC hospital commander, a grumpy one-star Army general that was pissed off because the "house call" was going to cost him his tee time. The general pronounced him dehydrated but overall his health was good. He injected him with the strongest sedative they had at hand and left orders to have Sáenz connected to an IV to re-hydrate him at least for as long as he was in-transit.

Sáenz, now dressed in surgical scrubs, was once again strapped to a stretcher and carried aboard a plane, this time a C-130 cargo plane headed for Fort Huachuca, Arizona. As soon as the plane was on its takeoff roll, one of the air traffic controllers excused himself and walked over to the bathroom. He checked the bathroom to make sure it was empty, and then took the farthest stall from the door.

The air traffic controller took out his Army-issue Blackberry/RIM device, and then exchanged the SIM card with one he carried hidden inside his wallet. He sent an encrypted email to a generic address that auto-forwarded itself to a server in Sealand, and then bounced off one more time to its final destination at CDI.

The controller replaced the original SIM card and returned to his

Pulling Strings

post. He had been away for less than 5 minutes.

In a small ceremony at the Fortaleza, Major Vélez was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, ARPR. Captain Arocho was promoted to Major, ARPR and awarded the Order of the Republic, a new medal that President Roth had to come up with in a hurry when he realized that the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico was so young that it did not have its own medals. Warrant Officer Ruben Martinez was promoted to Captain, ARPR and also awarded the Order of the Republic. The President made a point of explaining to Martinez that he expected people to stop calling him “Chief Ruby.” That was acceptable back when he was a mere Warrant Officer, but now as a Commissioned Officer in the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico, he needed to aim a little higher.

Everyone in the room immediately understood that they would call him “Captain Ruby” until somebody came up with a more colorful nickname.

Near the end of the ceremony, Colonel Vélez felt his Blackberry device buzzing. He read the message, raised an eyebrow and showed it to The Admiral, who signaled President Roth that he would appreciate a moment in private. After a minute, The Admiral returned and asked Vélez, Arocho and Ruby to join them.

“Colonel Vélez has received a class-one report that our boy is on a plane headed for Huachuca. The question is, how did they get a hold of him so quickly, and what are their plans?”

“While you two were in jail,” Vélez explained, “Sáenz made a phone call. It took us six hours to decrypt it but it seems the Americans nailed it immediately. Also, we can’t explain how they could find the rendezvous point, it was not part of the intercept.”

“Maybe there were more intercepts that we did not catch?” Arocho asked.

“Or maybe they just assumed the extraction would happen close to Guantánamo, since then they could blame the Americans for it,” Captain Ruby added.

Everyone more or less agreed.

“Why Huachuca?” Roth asked.

“Intel post, nice remote place to stash a guy if you need to,” Aro-

cho explained. “Plus people are used to have CIA and NSA types walk in and out at will.”

The question that everyone wanted to ask was if they had assets at Fort Huachuca. Everyone present knew that was not the kind of question you wanted to ask out in the open.

After a few minutes of idle chat, President Roth dismissed them. Vélez, Arocho and Ruby headed back for CDI. The Admiral stayed behind; obviously he had other things to talk over with President Roth.

Once back at CDI the three men took over one of their secure briefing rooms, where the question was asked:

“Do we have anyone at Huachuca?” Vélez asked.

Both Arocho and Ruby replied at the same time with “I know a guy,” then looked at each other and smiled for the first time in the evening.

“Back when I was in the Corps of Engineers I was sent to Huachuca on TDY³³ and I met a few Puerto Rican soldiers,” Arocho explained. “There’s one guy in particular that I have stayed in touch with.”

“What about you?” Vélez asked Ruby.

“Before I was a Seal, I trained as a crypto guy. One of our courses was At Fort Huachuca. There is a Puerto Rican Vietnam veteran working in the signals engineering branch.”

“Can these be trusted?”

“Yes,” answered Arocho.

“Mine has been feeding us good Intel for as long as I have been at CDI,” Ruby explained.

“OK, this is what we are going to do. Captain Ruby, go ahead and see what your guy can get you. Major Arocho, get in contact with your guy.”

Phone calls were made to three different points in New York City. In every case the recipient was a young male and around thirty years old. Their appearance was not remarkable: all three dressed

³³ Temporary Duty, when any US Department of Defense employee goes away on government business, the employee is temporarily assigned to the visited location so he/she can receive logistical support, like medical care, transportation and other services.

well, were fair skinned, tall and trim. All three were clean-shaved and wore their hair short.

Two of the men lived in Queens and worked as city policemen. The third man lived in Tribeca³⁴ and ran an Afro-Caribbean art gallery. The three men were picked up at their homes in black Lincoln Town Cars, and then driven over to Teterboro Airport, where a chartered Cessna Citation business jet waited to fly them to Tucson, Arizona.

The three men spent the first few minutes of the flight getting reacquainted. After the pleasantries were done with, the flight attendant handed them sealed envelopes with their instructions, throw-away cell phones and expense money. All three men were working for free.

On arriving at Tucson the three men were not met. Instead they hitched a ride from general aviation into the main terminal, where they picked up their rental car (it had been reserved a few hours prior) and drove the ten miles or so to Benson, where they already had motel room reservations.

They did not discuss their mission, instead they talked about the weather and the scenery until they could scan their motel rooms (and the rental car) for bugs. With nothing else to do but wait, they walked over to the diner across the street from the motel, where each of them bought a newspaper and tried to read it as slowly as possible.

The call would come soon.

34 Triangle Below Canal Street, the south most tip of Manhattan island.

Dorado, Republic of Puerto Rico

The Admiral lived in a modest (by Puerto Rican standards) three bedroom house across the street from the Dorado public beach. He had a nicer house in downtown Hato Rey³⁵, but this was the house where he was raised, the house he inherited when both his parents died. Except for the fresh coat of paint applied every year just before Christmas (he did it himself), the house looked pretty much the same as when he was a child.

The Admiral rated a staff car, usually a Lincoln Continental or, if lucky, a Cadillac. He did not like staff cars because he did not want to worry about a driver telling people where he came and went through his normal workday. Instead, he drove a battered 1981 Toyota Corolla, which helped him blend in with the other thousand Corollas out in the street at any given minute. While the body panels looked like they took a few beatings, and one of the fenders was still painted in gray primer, the car was in top-notch mechanical shape. A while ago he had one of his nephews take the car to a speed shop, where its suspension was upgraded and the full running gear was rebuilt. A much newer 2-liter engine replaced the old 1.8-liter 4-cylinder engine. The electrical system was upgraded so the Admiral's GPS receiver, police radio and mobile Internet terminal would not set the car on fire.

As it was his custom, The Admiral was up before 6:00 AM. He walked half a block to the closest bakery, where he bought the paper, a cup of coffee and a small pastry. He visited La Fortaleza almost every day, and President Roth always forced him to eat breakfast, so the coffee and the pastry were enough to calm down his stomach until mid-morning.

After finishing his paper, he walked back to his house, showered and at the last second opted for wearing his light khaki uniform instead of the more formal white uniform. He drove out of the beach

³⁵ One of the two central districts of the San Juan Metropolitan area.

area, then through most of Dorado and took the back route to Toa Baja. Right at the outskirts of Toa Baja he drove into the new³⁶ post office, which was located on the grounds of the only rum distillery in the area that was not at least 75 years old (Bacardi was just a few miles east).

At the post office he checked a half-dozen mailboxes used by some of his agents for document drops that were not considered critical. He left his personal mail on his front passenger seat, while the document drops went into a metal lock box that was welded to the bottom of his trunk.

From the post office The Admiral turned right and headed into Toa Baja. His plan was to drive into the Jose de Diego highway, which rolled through Fort Buchanan on its way to the Plaza Las Americas³⁷ junction. At the last second he decided to turn back into the beach road, which would take him by Punta Salinas, Levittown, Palo Seco, and Cataño. From Cataño he could be in Fort Buchanan in a minute or two.

The Admiral drove north until the road curved and started its run parallel to the Atlantic Ocean coastline, in the area known locally as “El Caracol³⁸.” He rolled down his window to enjoy the breeze. After the second turn on the road, a car pulled out from one of the beach lookout areas and followed him.

The Admiral paid no attention, since crab fishermen favored the area, so it was normal to see cars pull in and out of that spot in the early morning.

Right before Punta Salinas, a second car pulled into the road, this one a few hundred yards ahead. Before The Admiral could notice that there was anything wrong, the car ahead slammed on his brakes, which put it into a spin.

The Admiral started to slow down, hoping the driver ahead could control his car before he ran out of the road and into the marshland on the inland side of the road.

36 The “old” post office was in downtown Toa Baja; it was moved due to the continuous flooding.

37 For decades considered the biggest shopping center of the Caribbean. It is located at the crossing point between the two biggest highways in the island.

38 “The Sea ”Shell, named after an old seafood restaurant that stood at that spot more than two decades earlier.

The car stopped spinning, it was sitting sideways on the narrow beach road, without room to squeeze by unless you happened to be riding a motorbike.

The Admiral pulled out his cell phone to dial 911, when the two occupants of the front car stepped outside. One was obviously holding a rifle; the other one was holding a green tube that was at least a yard long.

The Admiral's training now kicked in, and he hit his speed dial to the CDI operations center while he started a handbrake turn to try to head the opposite way.

As the Toyota skidded and started its 180 degrees turn, The Admiral's brain correctly identified the green tube as an AT-4 rocket launcher, which was normally used against trucks and tanks.

The CDI operations officer answered on the first ring.

"This is The Admiral, today's authentication code is Alpha, 616. This is not a drill. Commence operation Medusa and notify everyone."

"Roger."

Things started happening very quickly.

When The Admiral's car finished its handbrake turn, he floored the gas, but he knew he was wasting his time, since the car that was following was now blocking his rear.

The Admiral heard the slow and steady fire of a semi-automatic weapon. He was not worried about the rifles, since hitting a moving target with a rifle is a hell of a lot harder than what it seems like in the movies. He then saw a flash on his rear view mirror, and a column of smoke flew by his right outside mirror. Then an explosion to his right.

The AT-4 rocket had missed.

The Admiral knew those firing tubes only held one round apiece, so unless they had more firing tubes, he felt he could run away from them even if it meant slamming into the second car.

More rifle fire and his windshield shattered. Bits of glass cut his face, but luckily none got too close to his eyes. The Admiral pulled a metal cable that was tucked underneath his seat. It activated a device that set up an incendiary grenade inside his trunk safe box. Regardless of what happened to him, nobody would be able to use the

contents of the safe.

The standard procedure for a CDI operation was to use the two-man rule. That is, two of the personnel had to agree that the order was valid before the mission would kick in. Medusa was a different deal.

The purpose of Medusa was to make sure that the CDI could not be decapitated. If it were known that any of the top personnel was in risk of capture or death, the person in question would call in his Medusa code. Things then started to happen very quickly. Automatic messages were sent to all CDI personnel, even the ones off duty. All access to CDI resources for the person would be removed, so if the person were compromised there would be nothing to access. And finally, the stand-in would take over the position until the situation had been resolved.

The Admiral's stand-in was Lieutenant Colonel Vélez, who was on his way to CDI after supervising the daily physical fitness training for his staff. He got his automatic recall as he was driving into the CDI compound at Fort Buchanan. By the time he was inside, Major Arocho and Captain Ruby were already in the action room, coordinating the launching of the only two FURA helicopters in the local area. All ground units in the area were dispatched too, but they counted on FURA to arrive there first.

"What now?"

It was then that Lieutenant Colonel Vélez realized he was in command of CDI, and everyone was looking at him for direction.

The Admiral slammed on his brakes once he realized that the second car also had an AT-4 rocket launcher, and that they were starting to train it on his car.

Fuck this.

As soon as the car stopped, he jumped into the marsh on the inland side of the beach road. He buried his face into the soft and rancid mud and sand mixture as soon as he heard the launch of the rocket. He had no doubt this time they would hit their target.

They did.

The Toyota blew up in a spectacular fireball; its dark smoke could be seen by one of the two FURA helicopters, now heading towards Punta Salinas from its station above the San Juan bay.

The Admiral finally realized he was still carrying his sidearm, a 10mm Sig Sauer pistol. He crouched and slowly tried to put some distance between himself and his attackers.

After a few seconds, he heard more rifle shots, but none came close enough for him to hear the impact. He was hoping to make his way around the front car and then spot decide to either run or face his attackers.

Once he was as close as he could, he noticed that his attackers were firing into any car that was heading their way, which meant they were definitely innocent, it was too soon for any ground police or Army unit to arrive.

He made up his mind.

Still in a crouch, and holding his pistol in a variation of the American Weaver³⁹ stance, he moved up to the road and shot each of the two men twice in the chest. As he was turning around to wave off anyone else heading over to the trouble area, he felt as if somebody had kicked his leg.

He fell.

He could not see anyone from his side of the chase car, and when he looked at his leg he saw his khaki pant was now a deep red.

Funny, I don't feel a thing.

The Admiral peeked under the chase car, but all he could see was the burning remains of his Toyota. From that position he could not see the other chase car.

The Admiral ejected the magazine in his pistol to check that he still had most of his bullets. Once satisfied, he replaced the magazine. He heard the thumping of the approaching FURA helicopters, which explains why he did not hear the approaching footsteps.

Right as he was preparing himself to peek again, the two remaining men stepped in from opposite sides and emptied their rifle magazines into the now semi-unconscious Admiral.

One of the two FURA helicopters saw this drama unfold, but it was too far for their on-board sniper to take the shot.

A third helicopter, this one an American built UH-60 Blackhawk, arrived from the south. The Blackhawk had rocket launcher pods

³⁹ A two-handed shooting method developed by Los Angeles County deputy sheriff Jack Weaver in the 1950s.

installed on both sides. The FURA pilots watched in awe as the Blackhawk smoothly lined itself with the far most intercept car and blew it to bits with two well-aimed rockets.

They could not shoot the second car yet since they could see the Admiral hiding behind it. The pilot called the CDI operations center to report that.

The pilot was terrorized when he saw the two men walk around and shoot the Admiral in cold blood. He put the Blackhawk in a hover just to the south, which allowed his gunner to train his machine gun on the two men. There was no escape for them.

The two FURA helicopters witnessed the shooting too. While one of the helicopters hovered over the water, with his sharpshooters keeping the two shooters in check, the second helicopter landed 50 yards away.

The two men were quickly subdued, and The Admiral was pronounced dead at the scene.

**La Fortaleza,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

President William Roth had locked himself into his personal study as soon as he received the call from Lieutenant Colonel Vélez. He would not even talk to his own wife. His last instructions to Vélez: figure it out.

Roth cursed himself for not seeing it coming. It was obvious that they would try to hit him and the most important people in his administration. The Admiral (even now that he had been killed on duty he still couldn't see him as anything but "The Admiral") was a stubborn man and had constantly refused his offers for armed police escorts or an armored staff car.

Roth pulled his address book, a battered little calendar notebook that he had carried on himself for many years. Once he found what he wanted, he dialed the number directly, he did not want his secretary to know what he was doing.

"Phallanx Security, how can I help you?"

"This is President Roth, please put me on with Victor, I know he is there."

Roth noticed some hesitation at the other end of the line.

"Mister President, Victor got here as soon as he heard the news and called in everyone. We all feel very sorry for your loss."

Roth was actually moved by this, and started feeling a tear forming.

"Thank you son, it means a lot to me. I am guessing that Victor once again read my mind."

"Yes Mister President. He told us to push back any private projects and to get ready for you."

"What do you have in stock?"

"We have four Suburbans with the factory police duty packages. There are 16 more arriving in two days. Those are already earmarked for the Police, but we can play with the paperwork a little bit. We got enough ballistic glass to prepare four Suburbans. We got

the rest of the ballistic glass shipped overnight, it will arrive by noon.”

“I want those four Suburbans processed immediately. Full defensive and electronics gear. If the police gives you shit, tell them to call me.”

“We will Mister President. What do you want me to tell Victor?”

“He already figured out what I want. Tell him we need those yesterday.”

“We won’t disappoint Mister President.”

Roth hung up.

Next he called his secretary.

“I want you to get the funeral started. I want him on the rotunda of the capitol, in his full dress uniform, with all of his American medals. I want a dual honor guard, so we need to get the Americans in it too. The man was a retired US Navy Admiral, god dammit.”

“Yes sir, we already started preparations, and I already called the embassy. The Marine detachment commander had already called us to volunteer a color guard.”

“Thank you so much.”

“We will all miss him.”

Major Arocho and Captain Ruby were at the scene of the shooting, overseeing the forensics team as they started to reconstruct the attack. One of the two FURA helicopters went back on duty around the San Juan bay, the second one was being used to make an aerial survey of the area. The helicopter was equipped with a variation of the gyroscope-stabilized cameras used for live traffic reports all over the United States. The FURA variation had both normal light and infrared cameras, and everything was captured as high definition video.

The ARPR Blackhawk had already returned to base to refuel and reload its rocket pods. It was due back within minutes and it would be kept on patrol around the crime scene until the investigators finished processing the scene. The road had been closed at the Dorado fork and at Punta Salinas, and every vehicle still in that road had been accounted for.

The final death toll was seven dead (including The Admiral and two of his attackers) and nine wounded. Of the wounded, two were

the gunmen that had executed The Admiral. These two were kept at a secure ward at Centro Médico. All other victims had been flown to the San Pablo medical complex just a few miles south-east.

Vélez was now in charge, but was pretty much locked into the CDI operations center. The word had come from President Roth that he was forbidden from even stepping outside to smoke until a full security review was completed.

Both Arocho and Ruby well knew they were wasting their time. The attackers were wearing clothes purchased locally, and none was carrying as much as a driver's license or even a wallet. Both AT-4 rocket launchers and M-4 carbines used in the attack had been stolen from Army National Guard armories in the months prior to the Americans leaving the island.

The weapons probably meant that either the *Independentistas*⁴⁰ had something to do with it, or somebody wanted to blame them for it. They both doubted that it was the Independentistas, after all, the island was already a sovereign Republic, so it would be stupid for them to sponsor a terrorist attack against a government that they actually support.

Obviously somebody was trying to throw off the investigation.

When it was obvious that there was nothing to gain by staying at the scene, so they decided to head over to Centro Médico. With luck they could probably break half of the shooter's toes before the doctors noticed.

Arocho's friend at Fort Huachuca had emailed Vélez the flight manifests for the last week's worth of flights arriving at the base. It was not much, but at least it got him something to keep his analysts busy. The CDI operations center was crammed with people with nothing to do. Vélez could not blame them, since many of them came in voluntarily once they heard about how The Admiral was assassinated.

Vélez decided to throw them a bone: he handed them a copy of the flight manifests, not expecting them to find much. He sent another copy to the three men still waiting at the motel just a few miles away from Huachuca.

⁴⁰ The former pro-independence party, which was rendered useless once Puerto Rico became a sovereign republic.

He wondered why Ruby's contact had not replied yet. Hopefully it was not a big deal.

Vélez suddenly felt a stab in his stomach. He had been at the operations center since the alert was called, and still had not eaten breakfast. Or lunch. He decided to drive to the officer's mess and give himself a short break.

He did not make it past the front door. The two biggest military policemen that he had seen in his life were standing out front and respectfully told him to get his ass back inside. When he told them that he was going to catch some chow, they explained that they were under orders to keep him at the ops center if it meant cuffing him to a desk. The officer's mess had already been alerted and they would make sure he would not go hungry. If he did not like the menu, they would be more than pleased to fetch him whatever fast food he fancied and was available within two miles of the Fort Buchanan front gate.

Vélez knew he couldn't argue, so he walked back to his office and lied down in his sofa until his lunch arrived. Back in his US Army days he had learned that sleep was a deciding factor in the way a leader handled a long term crisis. Well-rested leaders that understood proper delegation of authority always did better than the micro-managers that refused to sleep because they did not trust any of their subordinates.

Right as he fell asleep, his Blackberry/RIM device started buzzing. He did not hear it.

Vélez woke up an hour later, to the smell of the tray of fried chicken, French fries and fresh bread that had been left on his desk. He had barely started to eat when he realized that his Blackberry was blinking.

The message was from Captain Ruby's contact in Fort Huachuca. He had found where Sáenz was being kept, and even sent some digital pictures.

He shouldn't have taken the pictures, that was overkill.

Vélez finished his lunch, then called the three men at the motel with his encrypted cell phone. He briefed them on the developments of the past few hours and emailed them the pictures.

Vélez called his operations officer and outlined to him the next

probable steps of the Sáenz operation.

21

Outside Benson, Arizona

The three men now knew that Sáenz had been moved to a safe house in Nogales. This made them extremely nervous because it would be too easy to sneak him into Mexico and make their jobs a hell of a lot harder. As a precaution a second team had been called in and had already landed in Mexico. This would allow them to run a parallel operation within Mexico while they stayed within the US.

They were also worried that the Mexico border was the perfect place to play a charade on them, so they started drawing plans for possible operations on most major metropolitan hubs between Dallas and Los Angeles.

To avoid raising suspicions, the men changed motels every few days, and tried not to eat at the same place twice in the same time window, to avoid a waiter or cook recognizing them.

The team on the Mexican side of the border had to work under similar restrictions.

Eventually they had to bring in more people to help with the surveillance. These came from the North Virginia suburbs and a few from Georgia. They would not be briefed fully, instead they only knew they were expected to assist with an ongoing surveillance operation.

The safe house was an apartment on the second floor of the post office building in downtown Nogales. The only parking available was out on the street, and none of the apartments on the second floor had access to the rear of the building, since it was reserved for US Postal Service vehicles.

After some looking around they found that the building across the street from the post office was owned by the federal government. It was obviously set up for counter-surveillance, and it made their jobs a hell of a lot harder.

All it takes to break the security of an operation is for one person

to do something stupid. Sáenz had been successfully kidnapped from Cuba and flown halfway across the United States without anyone taking notice. His possessions had been carried along in an old US Air Force flight bag without anyone paying much interest to it. His original clothes, shoes, wallet and cell phone were still in the bag.

On his arrival to Frankfort, it had been explained to Sáenz that it was on his best interest to cooperate, since the second he made it out to the street the Puerto Ricans would sure as hell kill him. Because of this they stopped cuffing and/or sedating Sáenz before moving him to a new location. Nobody told him that the use of a phone was forbidden, instead they only left him in places where phones were not available.

After a while they started to leave him alone for shorts periods of time. Sáenz had been hyperactive as a kid, and it did not take long for him to get impatient and start roaming the apartment for something interesting to do.

And that is how he found the flight bag. And his cell phone still had some battery power left.

Sáenz couldn't help himself, he dialed his emergency number from memory.

"Why are you calling?" the person at the other end sounded annoyed.

"I was kidnapped! I went to the shed exactly as you asked me to, and next thing I know I am strapped to a stretcher in a god damn military plane and dressed like a fucking surgeon!"

"Where are you right now?"

"Nogales."

"Hang on tight, we are coming to pick you up."

"Can you trace this phone?"

"Yup. We already know where you are at."

"Hurry up, I need to get the fuck out of here."

For the first time, Julio César Piccorelli beat the NSA at their own game. His parallel computing array now had 2,048 nodes, and their sensor array had picked up on Sáenz's cell phone call. Minutes later he had the full conversation plus the geographical location, since his phone had a GPS receiver.

Pulling Strings

He called Lieutenant Colonel Vélez immediately and reported his findings.

Vélez knew they did not have much time left. He called his forward team in Arizona and outlined a crazy idea he had just imagined.

To his surprise, the Arizona team leader agreed.

Sáenz almost had a heart attack when his cell phone rang.

“Sáenz, I am the leader of a Puerto Rican forward team that has been tasked with finding and arresting you. We are just outside your apartment. We also know you called your co-conspirators. As we speak they have dispatched people to come to you with the excuse of taking you across the border into Mexico. In reality, they will murder you at their first opportunity.”

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t stand a choice. The Americans don’t know what to do you with you, and your friends want to kill you. You need to come with us.”

“If I come with you, you will take me straight to Fidel. That is as good as I get killed right here!”

“This is not about Fidel. We just want to talk to you. By the way, I think I just noticed a car drive by the post office for the fifth time in less than 10 minutes.”

“Fuck it, I am leaving with you, meet me out front in 5 minutes.”

The three men had been sitting at a coffee shop less than a block away. They immediately walked over to their rental car. They were unarmed.

The suspicious car drove by the post office a sixth time, but its occupants did not seem to notice the three tall men as they got into the rental car and slowly drove towards the post office building.

As soon as they saw Sáenz step out to the front of the post office, the driver flashed his headlights and stopped right in front of him.

“Get in.”

“Who are you?”

“We just talked on the phone, get the fuck in.”

Sáenz got in the back and hunched a little bit. They handed him an old and battered baseball hat.

They drove north while the team lead called Vélez to report the

rendezvous had been completed successfully. Vélez ordered him to drive up to Tucson international airport and head straight for the general aviation terminal.

The team leader was tempted with just flooring it and rush the hell out, but his training kicked in and he made the rest of the drive without even attracting the attention of any of the police cruisers awaiting in speed traps along the route to the airport.

At the general aviation terminal they were met by a jovial, motherly, fat woman who told them how to meet their charter and also handed them a manila envelope with travel papers for Sáenz.

The charter was a Cessna Citation similar to the one that flew them from Teterboro to Tucson. As soon as the hatch had closed, the flight attendant jabbed a needle on Sáenz's left shoulder. He fell unconscious almost immediately.

The charter flew to Yucatán, and from there to Havana. The plane was on Cuban soil long enough for Fidel Castro to come aboard to shake their hands and spit on Sáenz's face. Two soldiers then came aboard and dragged Sáenz out of the airplane.

The aircraft turned around to taxi back to the runway. None of the passengers bothered to look out and see what had happened to Sáenz. He was not their problem anymore.

The charter flew to Santo Domingo, República Dominicana, where the three men stepped off and each headed for a different commercial flight back to the states.

The flight attendant called Vélez to report on the flight, then took a taxi to her hotel just outside of the international airport. After a shower and a room service salad, she walked downstairs to the lobby, where she was picked up by a staff car from the Puerto Rican embassy.

22

Kourou, French Guiana

The European Space Agency (ESA) uses Kourou as its main rocket launching facility. It is the most popular and reliable civilian launch station in the world. It is also much easier to launch from there since it is much closer to the equator than any of the launching facilities in the United States.

Due to its popularity, it was the norm to wait three to five years from the signing of a contract for a launch until the launcher was built and it was ready for takeoff. The payload was the responsibility of the customer, unless the customer decided to commission the ESA with the design and manufacturing of the payload.

It was less known that it was possible to get your launch penciled in ahead of the usual three to five year delay. All it took was to pay an “administrative” fee. In other words, a bribe.

William Roth, who prior to his rise to the presidency of the Republic of Puerto Rico was an accomplished businessman and was worth billions, had made the proper arrangements to secure two separate Arienne-5 launches. He had provided almost no specifics except the payload weights he expected to carry, and that he wanted both to place their payload on a geosynchronous equatorial orbit, which depending on weight could be around 22,500 miles.

Present at the Kourou launch operations center were President William Roth, his wife and his only son. Julio César Piccorelli represented both CCT and CDI. Lieutenant Colonel Vélez wanted to attend but he was busy with the follow up investigation to the Admiral’s assassination. There were no representatives from the Guiana government, and most of the ESA staff was directly working on the launch, as the company (at Roth’s suggestion) had failed to send any of their top executives for ceremonial reasons.

The launch was a non-event. Roth was offered to push a big red button, which signaled the actual launch officers to turn their authorization keys. The Arienne-5 launched as expected and the satel-

lite was deployed as scheduled.

The truth of the matter is that Roth saw the launch as a personal victory, which is why his wife and son were present. The only reason he brought along Piccorelli is because he had heard that he had kicked and screamed when he heard Roth was going to see the launch and had not invited anyone from CCT or CDI. Roth really liked Piccorelli and decided to humor him. Plus for some reason Piccorelli and Roth's son got along like thieves.

With Willie Roth so close to graduation, it would have not broken his father's heart if his only child came up and told him he had decided to work for CCT instead of enlisting in the Puerto Rican Army.

The "payload" was a combination of telecommunications and imagery satellite. Thanks to improvements in imagery sensor technology at CCT, they had been able to design a spacecraft that could produce sub-1 meter images in both black & white and color. It was also capable of producing stereoscopic imagery, thermal and radar images.

The hardest part was not to build the satellite. That was actually easy. The problem was how to make sure that the Americans did not know that they had a imagery satellite that could work from a geosynchronous orbit. All of the American spy satellites were low orbit, which meant they could not spend too much time looking at the same spot. A geosynchronous satellite appeared to be fixed above a specific location, which meant it could provide continuous coverage.

Roth knew that the easy way out was to send out a press release and make sure the Americans got it first, sort of a little courtesy call to let them prepare their public reaction before the press noticed what was at stake. The problem is that he could not stop thinking like a businessman, and back in the day he had enjoyed taunting his competitors mercilessly. Because of this, Roth had ordered that the very first picture he wanted taken from the new satellite would be one of the parking lot of the CIA main campus in Langley, Virginia. He then had the satellite ground control station send the picture to the director of the US NRO.

The head of NRO almost had a heart attack. The photography was of similar resolution of his best photo reconnaissance satellite,

which could allow you to read the print on newspaper. The Puerto Rican satellite pictures were so sharp that he could read the print on the parking stickers on some of the cars parked at the CIA. And worse, the satellite was stationary, while his was low orbit. That meant the Puerto Ricans could take that kind of picture against any target in the western hemisphere.

On Roth's return to the island, he called in a press conference.

One of the first social initiatives of his administration had been the legalization of marijuana. Adults could purchase small amounts of marijuana for personal use, but only from authorized dealers. The marijuana carried a tax stamp similar in principle to the ones used for tobacco products. Selling marijuana without paying the proper taxes carried a stiff fine.

Cocaine, Heroin and other hard drugs were still illegal.

Roth understood he could not just tell people to stop using Heroin. The drug had a nasty withdrawal period, and methadone therapy had proved to be a disappointment.

At the conference, Roth announced a partnership with the pharmaceutical company that invented Suboxone, a drug used to treat Heroin addiction without the "high" that can result from using methadone. Suboxone was dispensed as a pill, and it was designed to work only as an orally ingested drug. If a patient tried to pulverize it to inject it, he would be subjected to nasty withdrawal-like symptoms. Because of this, Suboxone was starting to become popular as a real alternative for helping addicts shake off the habit.

Under the partnership, the owners of the Suboxone patent would receive preferential tax status for their factories in the Republic of Puerto Rico, in exchange for a reduced bulk price for the drug when purchased by any practicing physician in the Republic. The drug would also be offered for free at all government-run hospitals and health clinics.

While Suboxone had some critics, overall it was accepted as welcome addition to a treatment regime. It of course helped that Roth pretty much made the drug free to anyone that needed it. And because of the way that the drug was designed, it was useless unless you were a Heroin addict and you used it as prescribed.

Most of the world yawned at this announcement, but in the Unit-

ed States it generated plenty of controversy, especially in New York City, which had a very expensive Heroin problem and had been fighting for a long time to have Suboxone accepted as a standard treatment and maybe allow them to get rid off the god damn methadone.

When President Roth's chief of staff heard about the raised interest in the Subuxone program from New York City, he had a crazy idea. He called the secretaries of State, Treasury, and the Surgeon General and picked their brains for a few minutes. It was not so crazy after all.

He went to President Roth and made his pitch. Less than 24 hours later, the press secretary made the announcement: Puerto Rico would start a pilot program to provide Subuxone to non-residents. Puerto Rico wanted to establish treatment centers throughout the New York Metropolitan area, but they did not want to deal with regulatory red tape. Instead, they would sponsor up to one hundred addicts per quarter. The addicts would be flown to Puerto Rico at no expense. They would receive Subuxone therapy and counseling. Plus free medical care for the duration. In exchange, they would have to work in specific public works projects as specified by the department of the Interior.

The conditions were simple: the addicts would be subject to a zero-strike clause, so failing a random drug test (or for that matter, committing any kind of misdemeanor or felony) would put the person in question back on a flight back to Kennedy airport.

The investigation on The Admiral's assassination was moving too slow. The two attackers had been transferred from Centro Médico to the holding facility at Fort Allen. The guards were more than happy to subject the men to their now customary sleep deprivation treatment.

Major Arocho and Captain Ruby decided to pay the men a visit. Ruby was carrying a paper bag that was obviously stained with some kind of cooking grease. Their prisoners had been awake for at least 36 hours, and they were starving.

The smell of the food in the bag was so rich that the two prisoners started gagging.

Pulling Strings

The guards had cuffed both men to one of the two steel tables welded to the floor of the interrogation room. Ruby placed the bag on the other table and pulled out two 12-inch long tripletas and two cans of Coca Cola.

The prisoners literally salivated.

Arocho and Ruby sat down at their table, and not minding the prisoners simply started eating their lunch. They went through great lengths to describe how greasy and delicious they found their sandwiches.

One of the two prisoners started to cry.

“Pussy,” muttered Captain Ruby, then took another bite.

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary,” Arocho said. “This is the best sandwich in the world!”

“I don’t know about that. There is this deli in Bethesda, Maryland,” replied Major Arocho. “They make this sub they call the Manhattan, it is insane.”

“I have eaten that one.”

“When?”

“I was TDY.”

“Hey, we are hungry!” That was the crying prisoner.

“Shut the fuck up, we are talking here,” said Arocho, just a half-second ahead of Ruby.

“Why were you there in TDY?”

“I was taking an advanced combat medic seminar, this was back in my Navy Seal days. That deli shop is so close to the Bethesda Naval Medical Center that you can walk to it and back to the classroom in 10 to 15 minutes. How did you find out about it?”

“I ran a classified documents run from Fayetteville⁴¹ to Fort Belvoir⁴². When you pull courier duty they know you are already accounted as on the road, so every now and then they dump more stuff on you to deliver elsewhere close. Easier to hand the stuff to an officer courier that has been briefed properly than to go through the trouble of finding one of theirs, issue a pistol and harness, and making sure his security clearance and weapons ratings have not ex-

⁴¹ Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the home of the Airborne Infantry and the US Army Special Warfare School.

⁴² Fort Belvoir is a US Army base some 10 miles south of Washington, DC. It is used mostly as a support base for forces stationed in the capital area.

pired.”

“And you of course did not mind the detour, especially if it got you to hang out with the babes at the Pentagon and the Bethesda and Walter Reed hospitals.”

“Yup.”

They kept eating. The prisoners kept interrupting, and every single time one or the other told them to shut up.

Once done eating, and once Ruby was done licking his fingertips, they collected their trash and left the two men, still cuffed, alone in the interrogation room.

Less than a minute after, they were back inside the interrogation room, and once again they were carrying a bag with food.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me! You already ate enough food for five people!”

“Idiot, the food is for you two,” said Arocho. “Had you shut up when we told you too, we would have finished early and yours wouldn’t be cold now.”

Both prisoners started to attack their (now cold but still delicious) sandwiches.

Arocho and Ruby remained silent and waited until both men were finished eating. The two prisoners even collected their trash, probably hoping to get on their good sides.

“As you can see,” Arocho started, “we have the ability, and the will, to make things your lives easy or hard. We are ready to go through with this little charade of ours for many years. Imagine eating every two or three days, with almost no sleep, and soaked in cold water.”

“I want you two idiots to understand this: there is nothing you can do to save your sorry asses from what’s coming at you.” Ruby added.

“So, what’s in for us?” The second prisoner had talked for the very first time since his arrest. He did not even talk to his doctors.

“Life in prison, no possibility of parole. We don’t have resort-type prisons like the Americans do, but we are willing to recommend house arrest within one of our bases in the island.” Arocho finished.

“All you have to do is talk,” finished Ruby.

The interviews lasted two days. Major Arocho and Captain Ruby

Pulling Strings

ate all their meals with the prisoners to save time. They slept at the base infirmary, which was empty except for a handful of soldiers that suffered from various degrees of heat exhaustion.

The interviews were encrypted and transmitted to CDI through a terrestrial fiber optics line. This made it pretty much impossible for any outsider to eavesdrop into their communications between the bases scattered around the island, and the CDI headquarters at Fort Buchanan.

After the first day, Lieutenant Colonel Vélez realized that he was way over his head. He was still restricted to the CDI headquarters and operations center buildings, and he needed to talk to the president.

Vélez convinced the president to let him attend the Admiral's burial ceremony at the national cemetery in Hato Tejas, a few miles west of Fort Buchanan. If it was safe enough for the president of the Republic, then it was safe enough for a paper pusher like Vélez.

Roth agreed, on the condition that if anyone tried to kill Vélez, and he survived, he would demote him two full ranks as punishment for being so god damn stupid.

Vélez only had a few minutes to change into his full dress uniform. A FURA helicopter flew him to the abandoned drive-in theater in Hato Tejas, where President Roth was waiting in an ARPR Blackhawk.

The Blackhawk is not a loud helicopter, at least not when compared to its predecessor, the legendary UH-1 Iroquois, universally known as the "Huey." Still, the blades provided enough disruption in the air flow around the opened cabin that eavesdropping by long-range directional microphones would be nearly impossible.

"OK, let's have it," Roth asked.

"Chávez."

"You are positive of this?"

"Yes Mister President."

"The oil?"

"Yes. Hugo Chávez feels humiliated by the way you keep ignoring him and turning him down."

"And he is willing to murder my top counselor just to prove his point?"

"He wants more."

"Like?"

"He wants what you want, but for different reasons."

"And that is? Assumptions are a dangerous thing, Lieutenant Colonel Vélez."

Oh shit, here it comes.

"Mister President, it is not that hard to figure out. We got this ton of cash, but the island is not that big for all of us. Everyone else in the Antilles is underpopulated. We pitch in, help move their economies from agrarian to industrial, sell them cheap oil. Fidel knows we are not strictly capitalists, otherwise we would not spend so many millions on social programs. Fidel steps down and puts a progressive in charge, or what the hell, he starts it himself. In five years we are running the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico."

"Keep going."

"We do the same, little by little, with Mexico and Central America, but we leave South America alone. We sell them all the oil they can burn of course, plus cheap high tech like electronics, but no strings attached."

"What about the Americans?"

"Nothing, the Americans are neutralized with politics. If we keep our noses clean, they can't touch us. We can sell them all the oil they want to buy, and we are not members of OPEC, so they know we are not going to play with the quotas or prices. And the Europeans have proved time and again that the Americans will not object to a social democracy."

"The Americans are not going to stand idle while we swallow everything to their south." Roth was starting to play the devil's advocate.

"Of course they aren't, but they are held hostages by their own politics."

Roth clapped.

"Very well done Colonel. Now try to see if you can keep a secret. You pretty much outlined a plan that was only known by myself and our deceased friend. I need to know that you can handle this responsibility."

"Yes, Mister President, I am honored. I confess it feels over-

Pulling Strings

whelming as hell, but it has to be done.”

“You forgot one thing.”

“Actually, I didn’t. I did not think it was proper for me to remind you that you get to go through elections every four years. For our purposes I have a better job security prospect than you do, Mister President.”

Roth smiled.

“Do me a favor and keep yourself alive, I don’t like to bury my friends.”

Vélez nodded.

Roth signaled to his crew that they were ready to take the short flight over to the national cemetery.

The Admiral was buried in a semi-private ceremony with full military honors. The only civilians present were the Admiral’s immediate family and President Roth’s personal staff. Everyone else was in uniforms of all the military branches of the Republic of Puerto Rico and the United States of America. As a retired US Navy Admiral the Americans made it clear that they expected to be given the opportunity to grant him the military honors that he was entitled to.

Roth had gracefully accepted.

The color guard was composed of officers of the Army and Navy of the Republic of Puerto Rico, officers of FURA, two US Marine Captains and two US Navy Commanders.

The American embassy also provided a firing squad of US Marines, who executed the traditional 17-gun salute reserved for four-star Generals, Admirals and some high ranking civilian figures.

At the end of the ceremony, President Roth and Lieutenant Colonel Vélez flew back to Fort Buchanan, where the President had a chance to listen in on the continuous feed from the interviews still underway at Fort Allen. After half an hour, the two men met in a secure room for over two hours.

The president had not allowed any kind of external distraction during this meeting, and no recording was made of it. Only Roth and Vélez knew what was discussed.

Once the interviews were over, the two prisoners were driven from Salinas to Rio Piedras on the worst government-owned vehicle they could find with such little notice. The van used to be white

many years ago. It was battered and rusted. The tires were bald and the air conditioner did not reach the cargo hold.

The motor platoon sergeant welded steel plates to the inside of the van and turned it into a rolling safe. Breathing air flow was achieved thanks to natural convection and strategically placed air vents that were barely big enough to let air trickle a little bit. They changed the bald tires and at the last second they added bullet proof glass enough to protect the driver and his front passenger, who was riding the van for security.

The van drove to Rio Piedras so it would be out on the road during the warmest part of the day. The two prisoners protested loudly but the guards ignored them as instructed by Arocho.

Major Arocho rode an ARPR Blackhawk as part of the aerial security component of the transfer. Captain Rudy, wearing SWAT gear, was riding on one of the unmarked Crown Victoria police cars that made up the bulk of the convoy.

After two miserable hours (for the prisoners locked in the van, the driver and two front passengers were doing just peachy), the van rolled into the grounds of the Rio Piedras penal institution, the notorious Oso Blanco⁴³. Oso Blanco had been abandoned just before the end of the Commonwealth, but it has been re-opened after three months of upgrades aiming exclusively at increasing its security. There had been no effort made to make the prison humane at all.

Once the two prisoners were taken out of the van, they started screaming. They had made a deal for easy time, but they were about to be interned into the worst prison of the country.

They kept protesting, but Arocho and Ruby did not budge. They performed a small ceremony in which each prisoner was transferred from the custody of CDI to the Bureau of Prisons.

Ruby handed two thick envelopes to the guard shift supervisor.

The prisoners were taken to the in-processing office, where they were cuffed to a wrought-iron bench. They had to pass through three sets of iron gates, and the next gate was never opened until the previous one had been locked up.

The guard shift supervisor sat at the closest desk. There was no way for either prisoner to tell if it was the guard's assigned desk,

43 The White Bear.

since all of the desks were devoid of any kind of personal item like coffee mugs or family photos.

The guard spent the next two hours (there was a clock mounted on one wall) reading everything inside the two envelopes. Every time that either of the prisoners made any kind of noise he was rewarded by a swift and vicious punch to the ribcage.

The prisoners did not know, but the clock was set to run fast to throw off-balance any inmates that saw it. Veteran inmates knew to use the roving patrols as a means to keep track of time.

They also knew not to speak unless instructed to.

The guard did not need to read the files on the two new arrivals. He had been fully briefed by CDI, since by some mysterious reason the two prisoners were never processed by either the Police or the Department of Justice. One of the envelopes held the ballots that each unionized government employee had to use to vote for their new medical and retirement plans. The other envelope held various brochures describing each of the choices in the ballots.

The guards thought it would be interesting to see how the two prisoners reacted to see him read for two hours. In reality they had kept the two men sitting there for less than 45 minutes, but they were so exhausted that they had convinced themselves that the clock was running at the normal speed.

The guard stood up and seconds later half a dozen guards stepped into the office, cuffed them and dragged them away. They took the two men to a windowless room that reminded both prisoners of a gym shower. The walls and floor were covered in cheap bathroom tiles, and there was a drain on the center of the room.

The men were stripped naked and hosed down with a fire hose. When the prisoners started to protest, they were once again punched. A second guard threw scoops of delousing powder at each prisoner until both were fully covered with the white dust.

The guards rushed them to the next room, which was pretty much identical to the in-processing office except that it only had one desk. Stacked on the desk were two bundles. Each prisoner was asked to sign a receipt each for a coarse blanket (dirty), a bible (covers torn off), a pair of shower shoes (used) and some kind of dress made of a very coarse material.

“You expect us to walk in there wearing nothing but a dress?”
One of the prisoners asked.

One of the guards hit him.

“Learn to shut the fuck up.”

The guard turned around and hit the second prisoner.

“Now why the fuck would you hit me? I didn’t do anything!”

The guard hit him again.

“I thought I told you to shut up.”

The two men put on the dresses (they were made out of old rice sacks) and the shower shoes, and picked the rest of their things.

The men were marched out and into the general population wing of Oso Blanco, where they would be placed in separate cells.

The men panicked when they realized they were the only ones wearing the dress-like uniforms.

“Permission to speak, sir.”

“Go ahead.”

“How come we are the only ones wearing this?”

“Because that is the prescribed uniform for child molesters,” one of the guards explained.

“Motherfucker!”

Both men were hit again, then thrown into their cells.

Neither men survived the night. Both prisoners had been raped repeatedly, then stabbed and left to bleed to death in the showers. The next day they were buried in anonymous graves in the small prison graveyard.

23

**La Fortaleza,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

President William Roth was preparing to address the nation. Instead of broadcasting live from his office, he opted for speaking outdoors, which gave more room to the press to spread about.

Since they would be standing outside and it was sunny, Roth successfully convinced his press secretary that there was no need for him to wear stage makeup, a necessity whenever appearing on television from a studio. Roth wore his hair very short, so he would not need any retouching before the speech.

He also opted for informal clothes, something that his press secretary (or Mrs. Roth, for that effect) did not agree with.

The Puerto Rican government owns the communications spectrum⁴⁴ used to broadcast radio and television, sending and receiving wireless phone calls and other related services. Radio and television stations, and wireless voice and data providers leased part of the communications spectrum from the Puerto Rican government. Because of this, television stations did not put much of a fight when the press office called on them to provide a hole in their programming at 8:00 PM sharp.

President Roth started his speech right on cue.

“Dear citizens, as you all know by now, my dear old friend and counselor, Admiral José María Baldorioty, was gunned down by suspected terrorists along a beach road in Cataño. We now know who ordered this hideous crime, how it was executed and why.”

“Four men, at the direction of the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, traveled to Puerto Rico, purchased machine guns and anti-tank rifles from the Macheteros, then ambushed and murdered our friend and four innocent civilians that were on their way to work.”

Roth paused for a second.

⁴⁴ In the United States this role is performed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

“The four attackers are dead. We have irrefutable evidence that places them at the scene, including DNA and fingerprints, plus credit card receipts that trace all of their movements since their arrival at the island. Their credit cards were setup from bank accounts controlled by the government of Venezuela.”

“Why would President Chávez do something like this? Because of the oil. Puerto Rican oil is sweet crude, which is much cheaper to extract and refine than the coarse oil that the Venezuelans produce. We can afford to sell our superior oil much cheaper than Venezuela can.”

“When we originally announced the discovery of our oil fields, President Chávez offered us a bribe in exchange for us to keep our prices artificially high. This is of course illegal and unethical. As I speak, members of the press that are present are being handed a special information package that shows the official correspondence from President Chávez in which he proposes this illegal behavior. Additional copies are being transmitted to all newspapers, news bureaus and television stations.”

“The people of Puerto Rico bear no ill feelings towards their brothers in Venezuela. We understand that these are the actions of one immoral, deranged and delusional man that is on the brink of promoting himself to dictator for life as soon as his political opposition gives him too much trouble.”

“That said, we cannot stand idle while our citizens are murdered by a foreign power. Effective immediately I have recalled our ambassador to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. In addition, the Venezuelan ambassador is no longer welcome in the Republic of Puerto Rico. All Venezuelan diplomatic personnel assigned to the Republic of Puerto Rico must report to the American embassy in San Juan. The Americans have graciously agreed to help the Venezuelan delegation as they return back to their country.”

“I would like to emphasize that we bear no ill feelings towards our Venezuelan brothers. We will not answer to violence with violence. Earlier today we presented our evidence to representatives of the United States and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC. Both the United States and OPEC are preparing to present sanctions to Venezuela, including the possible expulsion

of Venezuela from OPEC. Venezuela owns ten refineries in the United States and almost 20,000 gas stations. The President of the United States has assured me that unless this situation is resolved, Venezuela may be forced to shut down most of its operations in the United States.”

“These are very serious sanctions, but they are the direct result of a series of intentional attacks that have cost innocent lives. We also know it is not fair that the people of Venezuela must suffer for the actions of Hugo Chávez. I urge you to demand that Mister Chávez is removed from office and deported to Puerto Rico to be tried for the murders of Admiral Jose Maria Baldorioty and four innocent bystanders. Bring that man to justice and we will lift all sanctions and request the United States and OPEC to do the same.”

“Thank you and god bless us all.”

CNN, Associated Press and Reuters reported that demonstrations broke out within the hour. Hundreds marched around downtown Caracas and most urban areas. The police was out in force, but so far there had been no violence. After another hour all of Venezuela’s television stations were airing unfounded reports that Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel was meeting with President Hugo Chávez.

President Roth was too wired up to even consider going to sleep. He decided to pay a surprise visit to CDI. Somehow he knew that Lieutenant Colonel Vélez was at the operations center watching the current developments in Venezuela. He sneaked out of La Fortaleza in an unmarked police cruiser. The streets were mostly empty, but still the police managed to send enough unmarked vehicles so it was not obvious that a presidential motorcade was driving across San Juan.

At the very last second, President Roth asked his driver to stop at the convenience store just across the street from the Fort Buchanan main gate. The driver announced to the rest of the security force that they would have to make an unscheduled stop. As he was pulling over into the parking lot, two police cars rolled in and four patrolmen quickly walked around the store, then the aisles inside. When they gave their all-clear signal, President Roth and his driver stepped out of their unmarked car and walked into the store.

The night cashier, sitting behind a bulletproof glass cage, barely

looked up from his paperback novel. Roth smiled.

Roth owned that whole chain of convenience stores, something that was not well known since he used holding companies to maintain some level of anonymity for his business dealings.

Roth shook his head and walked over to the bakery goods aisle. He picked up boxes of donuts, croissants and bagels, which he immediately handed to his driver and the uniformed policemen. He took tubs of cream cheese from one of the coolers, and then stood there, as if he had forgotten something.

His driver nodded towards the coffee station.

Roth handed his driver the tubs of cream cheese and proceeded to fill up special cartons with fresh coffee. These disposable cardboard boxes are lined with plastic and have a faucet at the bottom, which makes them perfect for carrying hot beverages.

The men carried everything to the cashier, who had by then figured out who his surprise visitor was. Roth paid with cash and left without saying a word. He would probably call his business manager and see if they could shake the cashier a little bit later, but now he was busy.

Lieutenant Colonel Vélez had discovered that with his new position came some very nice perks. He no longer had to push his own paperwork, instead two secretaries (one for administrative matters, the other one for classified matters) processed all of his paperwork, so all he had to do was sign it. This was nice, since it cut down his work day from 18 to 12 hours.

Vélez was starting to wonder what the hell he was still doing at the operations center, when President Roth walked in, unannounced of course.

“Colonel Vélez! I guessed you and your folks would still be hard as work, so we got you a little something.”

As if on cue, the policemen started stacking boxes of donuts, croissants and bagels on the nearest desk. Vélez almost suddenly felt starved. He looked around and noticed most of his staff looked as if they were thinking the same. Vélez nodded subtly and everyone, including the policemen, started attacking the food.

President Roth and Lieutenant Colonel Vélez waited at the end of the line, then carried their food to a secure conference room, which

conveniently had a big screen television currently showing CNN.

The two men sat down in front of the television and started eating.

"Mister President, the guys really appreciate what you did. Thank you."

"I remember many a night I pulled in operations centers just like this one. I learned that decent food was what made the biggest difference between a bearable shift and a crappy one."

"I know sir. On slow nights we have the MP's pull a food run for the shift guys. Tonight with the Venezuela situation the MP's are running double shifts, so we had to settle for microwaved burritos."

Roth smiled.

"Yeah, I remember too many of those too. What do you think about Venezuela?"

"Chávez won't last the night. Either he steps down, or they will do something drastic. We hear that Vice President Rangel is not much different from Chávez, but he could easily fake it just to get rid off Chávez once and for all."

"Will they give him to us."

"No sir. They will stall until he can bail. He has money, all he needs to do is jump on a plane and disappear."

"Can you find him?"

"Mister President, it took until 1960 for the Jews to find Adolf Eichmann. We won't rest until we find him."

"I know."

President Roth spent the next half hour walking around the operations center, taking advantage of that rare opportunity to meet those very young soldiers entrusted with the most critical secrets of the country. He swelled with pride at how serious and dedicated they were about their duties. He made a mental note to come up with some kind of perk for the troops.

Roth noticed that the background noise seemed to increase. When he looked up he noticed that most of the shift was clustered around the biggest television screen in the operations center.

CNN was reporting that Hugo Chávez had resigned as President of Venezuela and that Vice President Rangel had been sworn as the new President. CNN also reported that Hugo Chávez had left the

country to an undisclosed location.

Roth pulled Vélez aside.

“Go home and get a good night’s sleep, because tomorrow you need to figure out how the hell we are going to find that sono-fabitch.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

24

Judging by the overall reception to the new developments in Venezuela, it was painfully obvious that former President Chávez did not have many friends and would not be missed. The Americans dropped the pressure on Venezuela's oil interests in the states immediately. OPEC was a bit more cautious, but it was understood that after a month or so things would return to normality.

Major Carlos Arocho was not thrilled. The second he saw on CNN that Chávez had disappeared, he just knew that somehow, he would be stuck with that mess. His girlfriend was a hair away from kicking him out of the house, and he did not feel like going back to live on base. Or at his mother's house.

Captain Ruben "Ruby" Martínez was not thrilled either. Puerto Rico depended on stealing personnel from the US services in order to fill its special operations manpower needs. Ruby wanted to open Puerto Rico's first special warfare school. He had already identified former Army Special Forces and Navy Seals that were already serving in the ARPR.

He was confident that at least a third of these men would work perfectly for what he had in mind. His problem was that since his arrival at the island he had spent all of his time out in the field. He and his partner Arocho had accidentally become the unofficial troubleshooters of the CDI. He liked the job, but Ruby was very aware that once you got stuck into a troubleshooter job it was almost impossible to get out of it.

Ruby had been spending his precious little personal time in writing a staff study that he was hoping to present to The Admiral to see if he could convince him to at least start a pilot program. All he wanted was a dozen seasoned veterans, plus a dozen kids just out of the police academy to act as a control group.

With The Admiral dead, his plan was shot to hell, but he did not stop. He guessed that he could still write the study and show it to Arocho. He expected Arocho to agree with the general concept.

Vélez would agree too but only under general principles.

Ruby was sitting in his living room, watching CNN while he checked his training plan in his laptop. He was trying to come up with arguments on the merits of building new facilities from scratch or reusing some of the old national guard bases, but as soon as he saw that Chávez was gone, he realized that he was screwed.

Less than a minute later, Arocho called him.

“Did you see it on CNN?”

“Yeah.”

“You know what that means, right?”

“Yup, I can almost see Roth and Vélez waving the flag at us.”

“Exactly. How far are you on the training plan?”

“I got a rough draft, I was balancing budgets until CNN fucked up my night.”

“Clean it up and have it ready for Vélez tomorrow morning. We are going to need it.”

“OK, good night then.”

Arocho hung up. He spent the rest of the night putting together what would eventually become the outline for the search for Hugo Chávez, wherever the hell he was hiding.

Ruby also spent the night awake, trying to polish up his draft for the training plan. There was no way in hell that they could run their normal operations, plus the search for that asshole Chávez, with just the people they had at hand.

The next morning Arocho and Ruby were in their armored Suburban, driving towards Fort Buchanan when Vélez called then on their encrypted police radio that they would be meeting elsewhere.

Anywhere else in the world Ruby would have just pulled on his hand brake and performed a perfect 180-degree turn. If he tried to do the same in PR route 2, they would both die on the spot. Ruby simply drove around until he found a roundabout.

“Thanks for not doing the U-turn, I want to die of old age,” said Arocho.

Ruby smiled but did not reply.

They drove a few miles west until they saw the Santa Rosa Mall. They drove past the mall, then turned left at the last light before the sports complex.

Pulling Strings

“Man, *El Lido*⁴⁵ is right across the street,” Ruby said.

“Oh God, I haven’t had pernil asado⁴⁶ in years. We need to stop by on our way back.”

“We can go to the van for tripletas for lunch.”

“True, that’s on the other side of that stadium.”

They drove by the old district courthouse, then took the street that bordered the rear parking lots of Santa Rosa Mall. Arocho did not comment when Ruby drove by their destination. Obviously he wanted to drive around the block just to be safe.

After driving around for another five minutes, Ruby parked in front of a small house that was right across from the parking lots of the mall. The house had a tiny lawn, and in the Puerto Rican fashion all of its windows were reinforced with wrought iron bars. The side of the carport had been closed with ornamental blocks, and the front was guarded by a gorgeous colonial-style wrought iron gate.

The rear had been walled-in and converted into an extra room. The car port floor was tiled in polished rock tiles, which turned the carport into a receiving room or living room. There were some mismatched pieces of furniture arranged in the middle.

Whatever little patio the house had was now converted into a second carport, with the same ornamental block sides and iron gates.

Arocho noticed that the house had glass-paned blinds instead of the usual aluminum blinds found in most houses in the island.

As instructed by Vélez, Ruby reached inside of the mailbox and pressed the concealed ringer. The iron gate opened, obviously activated remotely. Arocho and Vélez walked inside and let the gate lock itself automatically. It was a clever arrangement, since it created a locked waiting area outside of the house itself. Even if somebody made it through the iron gates, the house itself was still locked.

Arocho guessed that one of the doors to his left led to the living room, the other one to the kitchen.

“What the fuck are you two waiting for?” Vélez called from the living room.

Ruby tried the door, which was unlocked.

45 A legendary restaurant on PR Route 2.

46 Roasted pork.

Arocho and Ruby stepped into the living room, which was furnished with seventies vintage furniture. The furniture was even covered in transparent vinyl. There was a tiny dining set at the far end, and the wall behind the dining table was covered with mirrors. It made the room seem much deeper.

"This used to be my aunt's house. When she passed and her daughters married, they did not want to sell the house to a stranger. I convinced them to sell it to me when I got back to the island. When I moved on base I leased it to CDI for one dollar per year. As of today this is the headquarters for project BSL."

Neither man asked what "BSL" meant.

"BSL stands for Bat Shit Loco, which is what we used to call Hugo Chávez every time he got into one of his crazy anti-American rants."

"Let me guess," Arocho said, "we are the lucky guys that have to find him."

"Bingo," Vélez replied. He turned to Ruby, "did you bring it?"

Ruby nodded, then pulled a keyring. He took out from the ring a small plastic fob, which held a concealed (and encrypted) file storage module. He handed the module to Vélez.

"This is going straight to Roth. We'll be sending you dossiers of the first group of trainers. As for BSL, Major Arocho is the case officer and Captain Ruby is going to run tactical operations."

"What about infrastructure?" Arocho asked.

"This house is secure. The outside walls have signal disruptors; you can't even use laser microphones bounced off the glass blinds. We own the houses in this whole block and across the street. You will have security both on-site and at random locations around the house. You won't even have keys, security won't even let you in if they see something weird. Let me give you a walking tour."

Vélez showed them the house. The living room, dining room, kitchen and bathroom had been left untouched. Two of the three small bedrooms had been turned into offices. The third one looked like a small version of the iron-sheet lined interrogation room in Fort Allen in Salinas.

Both Arocho and Ruby found that amusing.

"What about logistics?" Asked Arocho.

"We are using FURA people to run security. You know them all.

Pulling Strings

They will be using a couple of the houses as barracks, and there will always be a ready team on stand-by. By the way, half of those FURA guys heard rumors that we are about to start our own special operations school, and they are eager to impress.”

“The phone lines are encrypted, and your Internet access is optical fiber running straight to CDI, plus a VPN⁴⁷. Oh, and the FURA guys will take turns to cook here and at whatever house they happen to be camping at.”

“Budget?” Asked Ruby.

“BSL has a black budget, just tell us what you want and we’ll figure out how to pay for it. Your special operations school will probably also have a black budget, since odds are we’ll have to keep it classified for a while.”

“Yeah, I recommended that in my proposal.”

“OK, this is it. You two are on your own, you got my number.”

The two men found that the fridge and pantry were fully stocked. They took bottles of *malta*⁴⁸ and went back to sit at the “outside” living room. It was hot inside the house, at least in the carport they caught a little bit of a breeze. The men drank in silence.

“OK, how do you want to go with this?” Asked Arocho.

“For starters, we recall the three guys we used for the Sáenz job,” explained Vélez. “There is no way in hell that Chávez is in the United States, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti or the Dominican Republic. He will want to be close to where his money is. That means Grand Cayman, Bermuda, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Austria and Switzerland.”

“Keep going,” said Arocho.

“We put out feelers with the people that deal with financial transaction tracking for the feds. I know a girl that works for one of the companies that the feds use. All we need is to be pointed in the general direction, then we’ll nail him.”

“What else?” Asked Captain Ruby.

“We have informal contact with people at NSA, CIA, and NRO. Vélez needs to tell Roth that he has to start buttering up the Americans in case that they find Chávez before we do.”

⁴⁷ Virtual Private Network, an encrypted tunnel used to provide secure access to a network without compromising its integrity.

⁴⁸ A sweet drink that is a non-alcoholic byproduct of the beer brewing process. It is bottled in the same kind of brown glass bottle commonly used for beer.

“What about the operational side?” Arocho asked.

“We do our best to grab him on our own. If that doesn’t work, we can always cut a deal with the Germans, the Jews or the French. In that order.”

“I think that you are right,” said Arocho. “We’ll fly the three guys from the Sáenz job tonight. Call your financial contact and see what she can do. I am going to see how much satellite imagery we can buy through the commercial web sites before we get blacklisted. I want close shots of the airports around Caracas two hours before Chávez resigned and at least four hours after.”

“Operatives?” Asked Ruby.

“Three guys to run field ops, we are stuck here. We got a couple guys in London for a trade conference. One of them is CDI, ever heard of Piccorelli?”

“The code breaker? Works off CCT in Mayaguez?” Asked Arocho.

“That guy.”

“He is a nerd,” said Ruby, not entirely delighted with the idea.

“A really smart nerd. We can use him to support our field teams. He already has a travel itinerary that has him running all over Europe over the next month, so he won’t look suspicious if he goes on a little side trip every now and then.”

“Nice.”

“OK, let’s get the ball rolling.”

25

**Rohrbach,
Germany**

Gerhart Cohen cursed his luck for the tenth time since he woke up. He cursed his getting suckered into transferring to military intelligence while he was doing his mandatory military service, more than thirty years ago. He cursed his god damn lack of common sense for accepting his appointment to officer's school, and the service extension that it entailed.

He put thirty miserable years into the West German Army, a lot of it spent playing cat-and-mouse games against the Russians and East Germans. Cohen retired right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but was soon back in the game as an independent security consultant for the wealthy.

It was in this capacity that he was awake at this god awful early hour.

He had been contacted by a broker, asking if he was available to help "relocate" a client. He damn well knew that by relocate, he meant that the client in question was running away from something. Not a problem, he would do it mostly to keep himself busy, since he really did not need the money. He had a pension and he had become quite wealthy since he started his private practice.

The real problem was his client. He hated the sonofabitch. On their introduction, the client (a hotblooded, loud mouthed asshole who just a day before had been president of Venezuela) abused him verbally whenever he had the opportunity.

They had flown him and his entourage in a Swiss-registered Gulfstream IV, one of the finest executive aircraft in the world. Instead of showing some gratitude to whoever the hell helped to bail him out of Venezuela, the man had become a nuisance for the whole trip.

To make things worse, he had raised a stink at the airport, demanding to be received as if he was still a head of state. It took over an hour to reason with him and convince him to get into the May-

bach limousine that they had secured for his use while in Germany.

Chávez had originally wanted to take residence in Switzerland, but while the Swiss were more than happy to take deposit of his millions, they were not ready to give him a resident's visa. Chávez also had money stashed in Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and most private banking havens in the globe.

Cohen had been secured to oversee the efforts to find Chávez a permanent residence before his 90-day tourist visa in Germany expired. If he let that visa expire, nobody in the European Union would accept him.

Cohen had hired private security, lawyers, bankers and rented an understated yet roomy house in the hills of the Rhineland. The town was small but strategically located within a few kilometers from autobahn A62, which could easily put him in Frankfurt or across the border into Luxembourg or France in less than two hours.

Arocho now had a series of satellite shots purchased through the web site of the recently created imagery division of ESA. He already had much better photographs from the recently launched spy satellite, but he still needed to find the commercial version of these in case they needed to be used as evidence in an international trial against Chávez. CDI already had photo analysis experts trying to get aircraft tail numbers off the satellite pictures.

Ruby had phoned and debriefed Piccorelli. He was already on his way to the train station, so he could later claim that one of the reasons that he wanted to cross the channel was so he could experience the rail tunnel across the English channel.

Ruby finally got word from one of his friends. She worked at a financial transactions clearinghouse that helped the feds spot suspicious banking transactions. She confirmed that, lucky for him, the feds were looking for Chávez too. She reported that the Americans had already frozen all of his assets in the states, and that they were actively tracking him as he used his credit cards.

She could not tell Ruby his actual location because then it would be obvious where the information came from. Still, whatever little he got from her was good enough to be worth it. At least they knew

he was in Europe.

Once CDI analysts figured out which aircraft was used to pull Chávez out of Venezuela, it was very easy for them to find the flight manifests (which had been tampered with) and flight plans, which to their amazement were still accurate. They now knew that the aircraft, a Gulfstream IV, was owned by a Swiss chartering company. The plane had cleared customs in Frankfurt Am Main, and then flew to a regional business airport in Trier.

This made sense, since from Trier it would be easy to drive into Luxembourg without raising suspicions. It would also be convenient for rail access to pretty much anywhere in Europe.

Julio César Piccorelli was having a ball. The work at CCT was interesting and rewarding, and he finally got to travel a little bit. To make things interesting, right after he arrived at London the CDI people had called him to tell him that he would be taking part in field operations not yet determined. He had watched the news and had already guessed it had something to do with Venezuela.

Piccorelli had arrived at Frankfurt Am Main for an industrial trade show. Germany had been doing business with the Republic of Puerto Rico from day one, and they have always fought to be the first ones in line to license new technologies developed by the CCT. Piccorelli was scheduled to join the CCT delegation in two days, where they would showcase the new imaging technologies used in their satellite.

He used the two-day break as an excuse to rent a car and drive around a bit. The car rental agent at the hotel spoke impeccable English, so it took him less than 15 minutes to rent some kind of car he had never heard of (he had selected it by price, so it would fit in his supposed budget).

The car was an Opel Kadett, a front-wheel drive, 3-door hatchback. Also, it had a manual transmission, something that Piccorelli had not fully mastered yet. Piccorelli noticed that the reverse gear was in the opposite position as he was used. He firmly shifted to reverse, then let go of the clutch as slowly as possible, to try to judge its release.

The car lurched forward and almost hit the wall of the under-

ground garage.

Piccorelli cursed, then shifted to neutral, and back to reverse.

The car lurched forward again, this time the front bumper did touch the wall. Alarmed, he got out of the car to check on any damage, but to his surprise the lower third of the wall was covered with a soft rubber bumper. Obviously the Germans expected foreigners to have problems shifting.

On his third attempt, Piccorelli noticed that the shifter had a ring button underneath the knob, when he pressed it the shifter moved a little more towards where the reverse gear should be located.

This time the car did move backwards. Piccorelli cursed again, then drove away. He used his multi-mode cell phone to call CDI to report he was on the road. A minute later, Vélez called him.

“Julio, how’s the trip so far?”

“It’s OK, except I almost ruined a rental car because I could not tell that the reverse had a lockout button, so every time I released the clutch I hit a wall in the parking garage.”

Vélez chuckled.

“Half of their cars are like that, the other half require that you push the shifter down or it won’t engage reverse. It’s some kind of safety safeguard.”

“I am driving south, almost in Mainz/Ludwigshafen.”

“I have been there, be careful, Mainz is arranged as a perfect grid, confusing as hell. And if you cross the river, it means you are on a different city.”

“Nice, I did not see that in the Michelin guide.”

“We got some leads on the BSL job. I need you to turn east on autobahn A6, then head over to Kaiserslautern and find an Internet Café so you can download an information packet.”

“How far is that from here?”

“Hour and change. Be careful, Kaiserslautern is the biggest US military community outside of the United States. They call it K-Town and it is crawling with Army and civil service types.”

“Noted. I guess you’ll hear from me depending on what’s in that packet.”

“Yeah, be safe out there, the Germans drive like madmen.”

As instructed, Piccorelli turned east on autobahn A6 (or E50,

Pulling Strings

which eventually crossed into France and led straight to Paris) and pulled over at a truck stop just outside Kaiserslautern Ost. After filling up and drinking a cup of coffee that was surprisingly good, he bought a Kaiserslautern visitor's guide, then decided the coffee was a fluke and bought a second cup. It was better than the first cup, and of much higher quality than the coffee that he had been used to drink in truck stops along the I-95 corridor in Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey.

The rental car had a GPS unit with a scrolling color map, but it was not sophisticated enough to suggest destinations beyond hotels, airports, gas stations and airports. The visitor's guide had plenty of detailed maps of the area, and its last twenty pages were full of classified ads. He spotted three possible places where he could get online with his laptop.

Piccorelli did not need the signs to know that he was in Kaiserslautern, since 75% of all cars that he saw had the shorter license plates used by US cars, instead of the long and narrow plates with tall letters used in most of Europe. The American license plates were silver and had the letters USA printed vertically in the middle of the plate.

He could also tell that the Germans drove very carefully whenever around Americans, since as far as he could tell, all of the Americans were driving like maniacs. He took the off ramp at Kaiserslautern Ost and into route B40.

Piccorelli drove a few blocks until he found a public parking garage. He left his rental there and wandered with no particular direction. After walking and taking digital pictures of old churches for about half an hour, Piccorelli pulled out his travel guide and tried to find his bearings, then asked a nearby policeman to help him orient his map. It was all part of an act, if anyone had been following him he would look too suspicious if he zigzagged through an unfamiliar city on foot, then walked into one of the only three coffee shops in a 10-block radius with free wireless Internet service.

Piccorelli thanked the German policeman in Spanish, then headed to the coffee shop. He took an empty booth, more because it was closest to the ceiling-mounted wireless Internet antenna, than because it would allow him to see most of the shop without hurting his

neck.

Two hours, three cups of excellent coffee, and one bowl of *goulash suppe*⁴⁹ later, Piccorelli had finally caught up with all the background material that had been collected by CDI. He now knew that Chávez was hiding somewhere to his north, and that the Americans had frozen all his assets, so there was no way that he would try to ask for asylum in the states.

He also knew that three field operatives were on the way and he would have to figure out how to support them as they put together their plan to extract Chávez.

Finally, they had provided him with a local contact. A retired US Army Master Sergeant owned a car insurance agency just a few kilometers west from Kaiserslautern. The retiree was not only of Puerto Rican origin and sympathy, but he also had contacts with certain Germans that could be useful to the mission.

Piccorelli paid his bill and showed the waiter his parking ticket stub. She immediately understood that he was asking her for directions to return back to the public parking garage, so she drew him a map on a paper napkin. This was again part of his cover as a clueless tourist, he knew he couldn't just magically find his way back to that parking garage on his very first visit to the town.

Piccorelli noticed that as he made his way through Kaiserslautern there was a very high percentage of store signs in English, and many of them had American flags. He guessed (correctly) that many of these businesses either catered to, or preyed on, American soldiers stationed nearby.

He drove past Vogelweh, a huge US military housing and services area with family housing for 10,000, supermarket, department store, movie theaters, medical services and even a rod and gun club. He was getting closer.

Past Vogelweh, he noticed the signs to the Opel factory complex, the biggest non-NATO employer in the area. His destination would be right across the intersection that led to the Opel access road.

The building was probably an old family home hastily converted into office space. It was painted an ugly shade of brown, and it was furnished with what he guessed was military surplus office furni-

49 A very thick beef stew of Hungarian descent.

ture.

The receptionist addressed him in German, probably confused by his long and curly hair. Piccorelli guessed that anyone walking with a crew cut would be automatically addressed in English.

“I don’t speak German, sorry. I am looking for Gallo.”

“Oh, sorry about that. He is upstairs, you can just walk up.”

Piccorelli thanked her and walked upstairs.

Master Sergeant Marco Antonio Flores, US Army Retired, was the proverbial loud little guy. He barely stood above five feet, but easily offset this with an extroverted personality that bordered on the annoying. He had spent his 22-year enlistment mostly in the infantry, with just one exception when he spent three years as a recruiter. That was when he learned that he had a natural ability for sales.

He had never hoped to make it past sergeant first class, but once he made it to first sergeant he allowed himself to dream of staying 30 years and trying to shoot for sergeant major. His tour as a recruiter changed that. As soon as he got promoted to first sergeant he was sent to run a recruiting company in Miami. When he came back he spent the rest of his enlistment learning as much as he could about sales. On retirement he learned that insurance companies in Germany were looking for military retirees to run franchised agencies.

His agency was now seven years old and moving along quite nicely. He explained to Piccorelli that he could easily rent better digs for his offices, but he did not want to give the impression that he was doing too good or his customers would complain that he overcharged them.

“How do you know Colonel Vélez?”

“He did not tell you? He is my nephew, his mother is my sister.”

Piccorelli started humming a few bars of “It’s a small world after all” and Flores chuckled.

“What about the nickname? Why do they call you Gallo?”

“Because I strutted like a fighting cock, they call that ‘small dude’ syndrome.”

“Was it rough for you?”

“Not really, one of the first things you learn in the Army is that you never fuck with the little guy. The little guy is as strong as you

are but can run, and fight, much faster. The fiercest combat soldiers I ever met in my life were the little guys."

"Impressive."

"Enough with the little talk. After I talked to my nephew I made a few calls and hit pay dirt."

"Holy shit, how?"

"A guy that knows a guy that knows one of my buddies at the chamber of commerce."

"What about him?"

"He is running security for Chávez."

"Are they still here?"

"Yes, and Chávez is about to fire this guy, so you need to move quickly."

"I need to use your Internet connection."

"The office across from this one is empty, nobody is going to bother you."

Piccorelli set shop at the small office and prepared his emergency messages to the BSL team. He sent the messages and checked his email in case CCT or CDI had sent him more information. The field team was now in-country, waiting in their hotel just outside the Frankfurt Am Main airport until he had more concrete information for them.

Piccorelli called Flores over.

"Our guys are waiting in Frankfort, how much do you know about wherever the hell is it that they are keeping him?"

"He is in a family house in a small town about an hour or so north west of here. There is no armed security and his entourage consists of mostly old cronies and their wives or mistresses."

"How the hell are we going to get him out of Germany?"

"We are not."

"What do you mean?"

"He is wanted by the Americans as a criminal. All you have to do is pick him up, drive him to the nearest US base and hand him over to the military police. They always have FBI people around."

"I am gonna have to call it in. Do you think you can help my guys put together the specifics on how to turn him in?"

"Sure."

Pulling Strings

Piccorelli pulled a cell phone from his briefcase.

"This is an encrypted cell phone. Their numbers are on speed dial so they will trust your call. There is no way to call these numbers through a normal phone."

The news were well received by Arocho and Ruby at BSL headquarters. Vélez was a bit more wary about it.

Since Vélez now had his own assigned armored Suburban, President Roth had lifted his travel restrictions. He was still forbidden from going anywhere alone, but at least he could move around as needed. Vélez had driven himself to the safe house in Santa Rosa. He had spotted at least one chase vehicle, which meant there were at least two more out there.

Vélez found Arocho, Ruby and one of the FURA guards going over maps of the southwestern area of Germany.

"Colonel, this is Andrés Caratini," Ruby said. "He was an Air Force MP and spent a tour stationed at Ramstein, just a few miles away from where Piccorelli and your uncle are at."

"I am guessing you know the area well."

"Yes sir. I was single and bored, so I bought a cheap BMW and blew my extra money on gas and caffeine. I have probably driven every road in the southwestern area of Germany."

"Do you think they'll have trouble with the Germans?"

"Yes, but if they take advantage of having access to your uncle, it is not going to be a problem."

"Why?"

"Because as a retiree living overseas he still has base privileges. His car has access stickers that will let him in and out of most of these bases unchallenged. They'll ask him for his ID card, and they will probably make him show his sales tax permit is up to date, but they won't bother him."

"Sales tax?"

"The base is tax free only for sponsored personnel, which he isn't. That means that before he leaves base he takes his receipts to the MP station and files a short tax statement for the Germans."

"OK, so how would you do this?" Vélez asked.

"I would drive up to that house, which takes about one hour from

Vogelweh. I would snatch up the guy, duct tape him and throw him in the trunk. I would use your uncle's main car if possible. They'll drive him straight to Ramstein Air Force Base, where he would identify himself and report that he has a wanted criminal in his trunk." Caratini finished.

"What will the Germans say?"

"Nothing, Chávez is not in Germany in an official capacity. If the Americans take him, their problem goes away. They can deal with his entourage later."

"Why not just fly him down here?"

"That would take more time, which we don't have." Arocho explained.

"He gave the Americans too much heartburn over the past few years, this is their chance to screw with him. After they are done with him we'll ask for extradition."

"I wonder if Roth will go for it."

"I guess you have to ask him about it." Arocho said.

26

**La Fortaleza,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Roth had not been very receptive about the plan to turn in Chávez instead of bringing him to Puerto Rico, but at least it would save him from a potentially embarrassing public relations fiasco. He gave the go-ahead to the mission.

Piccorelli was now in direct contact with Gerhart Cohen, who was disgustedly happy about getting some payback after suffering so much aggravation at the hands of Hugo Chávez. Cohen had stationed some of his agents around the house. His excuse to Chávez was that he wanted to make sure that they were safe, but in reality he wanted to make it sure that Chávez wouldn't be able to sneak out at the last second.

The three field operatives were driving to Vogelweh to meet Piccorelli and Flores. With nothing more to do, Flores drove him to a Tex-Mex restaurant half a mile away and the two men exchanged island gossip while they attacked an endless mountain of spare ribs and French fries.

Less than an hour after they were back from the restaurant, the three operatives walked in. They had already planned the operation over the phone, and they were starving so Flores had his receptionist drive them to the restaurant so they could eat and relax.

On cue, Flores picked up his phone and called Cohen. He asked him to figure out a way to send Chávez's entourage away because a German VIP wanted to meet with him. He agreed to send them to a shopping mall with a couple of the guards. With luck they would ask for a taste of the local beer, which would give them the excuse to disappear for the next few hours.

They had plenty of time for the field team to get back (they ate lightly) and drive to the house before these people returned. Flores drove his minivan with Piccorelli as his only passenger. The three operatives rode in a rented Mercedes sedan. They met Cohen at a restaurant down the road from the house where he was keeping

Chávez.

As planned, Flores and Piccorelli stayed behind. The three operatives and Cohen would drive up to the house in the Mercedes. After picking up Chávez, they would call Flores and Piccorelli. It was up to Flores and Piccorelli to drive Chávez to Ramstein Air Force Base, some 45 minutes to the south.

Cohen and the three operatives drove up the hill to the house and parked out in the street. The four men casually stepped out of the Mercedes and walked up to the house. One of the guards opened the door when he recognized Cohen.

Cohen had briefed his men, so on cue the only guard left in the house walked outside and lit a cigarette, the signal for everyone else to go home and forget about that job. The guard finished his cigarette, got into his Ford Fiesta and drove away.

Hugo Chávez, former president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and now a fugitive of justice in at least three countries, was sitting at the breakfast table in the kitchen, nursing a tall glass of German Bitburger beer while he leafed through a two-day old copy of the International Herald Tribune. He noticed Cohen walking toward him, smirked and kept reading.

The three operatives quietly walked to his sides. Chávez felt the movement but did not look up.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“These gentlemen are here to provide you with transportation.”

“Where? I am not going anywhere!” Chávez was visibly agitated.

The two men to his sides pinned him to the chair, while the third one removed what looked like an asthma inhaler pump. He shook it a few times, then shot a burst of the aerosol into Chávez’s face.

Chávez passed out.

“Will he be OK?” Asked Cohen.

“Sure,” one of the operatives replied. “He’ll feel drunk for the next six hours, but that’s about it.”

The two men to his sides grabbed him and carried started carrying him to the front of the house. Cohen called Flores on his cell phone to tell him he could drive up to the house to pick up their payload.

Gerhart stayed behind. He would wait until the others came back.

Pulling Strings

He had already briefed the two guards that were driving the entourage around, so they would not be surprised when they made it back to the house.

Flores drove back to Ramstein with Piccorelli as his co-pilot and one of the three operatives for security in case Chávez woke up. The other two men followed them in the Mercedes sedan. Once they were back on Autobahn A62, he called the BSL team headquarters to report they were on the run.

Arocho and Vélez had asked for a small variation from the plan. They wanted to give Ramstein a heads up when Piccorelli was less than 10 minutes away from the base. Roth had already called on the President of the United States to tell him what was happening. He expected the President to throw a fit, but overall he took it very well. The President promised Roth that he would talk to the Attorney General to make sure the FBI guys at Ramstein would be prepared for the arrival of their fugitive. He also recommended to Roth that he should call the Germans, since so far Puerto Rico had enjoyed an excellent relationship with them. Roth agreed.

The German chancellor was grateful that the Puerto Ricans and the Americans would take that hot potato away from her hands. Her government was hanging by a thread, and she did not need the political hassle of having to explain why she allowed that man to be kidnapped. Since Chávez had not been received formally, they could just play stupid.

The main access road to Ramstein Air Force Base was a gigantic (and perfectly straight) eight-lane highway. The highway was actually a landing strip, but its size was perfect to queue the morning commuters as they tried to go through base security. This meant they could have four or more security booths open at the same time without making a mess.

At the beginning of the highway/runway there was a small open area, fully paved. It was informally used as a staging area for soldiers that ran on the trails that go through the mostly flat area outside of that part of the base. The minivan and Mercedes pulled into the staging area and Piccorelli called BSL control once again.

Arocho explained to him that hey had given a heads up to the feds, and gave him a phone to call to tell the people at Ramstein

that they were less than 10 minutes away.

The FBI special agent in charge of all FBI personnel working in Europe had been in Ramstein for a NATO meeting. He was called by the director of the FBI, which rattled him a little bit. He called the office of the Provost Marshall and the commanding general. It was agreed to double the MP presence at each of the gates.

When the Puerto Ricans called to say they would be arriving in less than 10 minutes, the agent and his military police liaison drove a Humvee over to the main gate and waited for them to arrive.

The three operatives left in the Mercedes. They were tired and their hotel was almost two hours away. Flores drove his minivan and stopped before one of the guard booths. Chávez was already awake but still disoriented.

Flores flashed his retiree ID card, and Piccorelli showed his US passport (Puerto Ricans did not lose their US citizenship when the island became a republic). The MP's at the gate took one look at the passenger in the back of the van and made a hand signal.

The gate opened and a second MP directed Flores to drive slowly to the guard house to the right of the gate complex. The FBI agent and a half dozen agents from his detachment were waiting out in the parking lot. As soon as Chávez was out of the minivan, one of the agents pulled out a stack of glossy photos, which he used to compare them with Chávez.

Once properly identified, Chávez was dragged into the guard house, where he was checked by the commander of the Landstuhl Army Medical Center. The doctor pronounced him healthy but under the influence of some kind of drug. Piccorelli denied any knowledge of this, but he handed them a small aerosol bottle.

The doctor looked at the label, then told him that he was lucky that they did not kill him. Chávez was cuffed, hooded and driven to the flight line, where a C-5 Galaxy cargo plane was finishing loading. The FBI agents brought Chávez through the back ramp of the gigantic aircraft. Instead of cargo, all they saw inside was a camper trailer.

The camper was used to transport US Department of Defense VIPs. The trailer had a small kitchen, a bed, a fully-equipped office and a bathroom with a shower. This way the VIPs could fly long dis-

tances without getting worn out.

Chávez was strapped to the bed and sedated. He would fly from Ramstein to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. From there they would take him, still in the trailer, to an undisclosed holding facility in DC.

Flores drove Piccorelli back to the agency so he could pick his rental car. He offered to take him to dinner but Piccorelli was completely exhausted. He planned to spend the next day sleeping.

Cohen enjoyed telling the entourage, now completely drunk, that the Americans had come to arrest Chávez and that they would have to make their own arrangements for travel. A price was proposed on the spot, and Cohen agreed to help them travel wherever they wanted to. After all, none of them were criminals and it was not fair for them to suffer just because they were close to Chávez.

Washington, DC

Chávez was flown to Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware. US Marshals from the Eastern Virginia district took over from there. They had a doctor on hand to make sure it was safe to complete the next stage of the transfer. The “patient” was a bit dehydrated, but otherwise he was in good health. The Marshals let him walk around the trailer a few times so he could stretch his legs, since they were inside a secure hangar, there was no risk of him being spotted by a news reporter.

After a full breakfast of ham, eggs, bacon, toast and black coffee, he was put back in the trailer. This time they put him in a thick leather harness with steel cuffs chained to it. He would have enough freedom of movement to sit up, turn the pages of a newspaper or use the bathroom. The doctor and two Marshals remained in the trailer with him.

The trailer was hooked to a US Marshals Service Suburban and towed to the federal courthouse in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from DC. Security was provided by three additional Suburbans, plus the cooperation of the state police departments of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

Hugo Chávez listened as his indictment was read in both English and Spanish. When asked if he understood the charges, he spit on the direction of the judge. The judge took the indictment and penciled in two extra charges for contempt and for littering in a federal government facility. Chávez was driven to Fort Belvoir, in the same motorcade minus the trailer since they wanted the press to take a good look at him, now dressed in an orange jumpsuit, and cuffed and shackled.

Fort Belvoir was not the obvious choice for his holding cell, but the feds wanted to restrict outside access to him, and the Belvoir stockade would be perfect for the job.

The only one that was not amazed at how smooth it all went was probably President Roth. It would take at least two years for the

feds to prosecute and convict Chávez.

Roth thought about his alternatives.

The feds are never going to let me have him. I can arrange for an accident at his prison, but then they'll suspect us. I can arrange for his time to get as tough as possible, but once they break him then he won't even notice whatever they do to him.

Chávez is already crazy, but he has his priorities straight. It is always about the money. We need to find all the billions he stole off the country. He was probably stupid about it, so maybe in two or three months we can get it back. It is not enough for us to bother with confiscating it, but if we can return it to the Venezuelans it will help us a lot in the public relations department.

The trick is always the money. Follow the money.

Roth lifted his phone and called his secretary.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Every other presidential secretary in the world answers her phone a hell of a lot nicer than you do."

"I am old enough to be your mother, oh wise leader. What the hell do you want? I was watching a soap opera!"

"Call Vélez here, I need him now. Then call the secretary of the Treasury and ask him if he would like to have lunch with me."

"Done."

She hung up before he could thank her.

Vélez arrived half an hour later.

"Bad traffic? Your truck doesn't have police lights?" Roth sounded annoyed.

"I don't like to call attention to myself, sorry Mister President."

"Sit down. Your guys did a good job on the Chávez deal."

"I would have preferred to have him down here, but having him tried to by the Americans will give the whole thing an air of legitimacy. Plus any political fallout will hit them, not us."

"That's true, but there is more to that than just the trial."

"You mean the money, right?"

"Yes."

"You want us to find whatever he stole? Then what?"

"I want to give it back to the Venezuelan treasury."

"It's a sizable amount of cash. Not enough to make a dent on our

coffers, but to the Venezuelans it is a hell of a lot. They will feel like they owe us for the gesture.”

“Exactly. I don’t want to tell you how to run CDI, but I suggest you leave the task force open to deal with the money tracking. As for the special forces school, it is approved. You know what you have to do.”

“Thank you sir.”

“There’s one more thing. How do you think that your uncle would react if we offered him a job?”

“I think he would like that a lot. Can I ask what you have in mind for him?”

“He can be the Sergeant Major of the special forces school. He is qualified, right?”

“19 out of his 22 years were in the Infantry, and he is Ranger qualified. I don’t know if he went to the special forces course, but I bet he did.”

“Let me know as soon as he accepts.” Roth stood up.

“I will, Mister President. Thank you.”

Roth walked him to the door and waved in his secretary of the treasury, who had been nervously waiting while his secretary stared him down. The poor man felt like he was back in school and was waiting to get chewed up by the principal.

Vélez drove straight to the Santa Rosa house, where Major Arocho and Captain Ruby were still holed up. Any time Vélez walked into the house he felt assaulted by hundreds of memories from his childhood, all of them happy. This time he could smell the unmistakable aroma of roasted pork.

“Where did you guys get that *pernil asado*?” Vélez asked.

“The FURA guys picked it up from *El Lido*. There’s enough food here to feed a battalion.” Ruby explained.

“I am glad because I am starving.”

The men did not talk shop while they ate. They were spending every waking moment on duty, so the improvised lunch was a much needed break. After they were done eating, one of the FURA agents placed a carafe of freshly brewed coffee on their table and excused himself.

"The president is sending his congratulations for a job well done. That's the good news. The bad news is the task force has to stay open, we got a new job."

"And that is?" Arocho asked.

"We need to figure out where did Chávez stash all the money he stole from the Venezuelan treasury."

"What about the school?" Ruby asked.

"The school is approved. Get started with the selection process for the cadre and the final picks for the training facilities. You have a week."

"What about the first group of trainees?"

"We already have enough candidates identified, plus we'll bring a small group from the class that just finished the police academy. They will be your control group."

"That works."

"Who's gonna run it?"

"Ever heard of a Master Sergeant Flores while you were in Special Forces?" Vélez asked Arocho.

"Everyone knows Flores." Arocho smiled. "He is a little crazy sonofabitch. Is he coming?"

"That little crazy sonofabitch is my mother's brother, and he was the one that helped us find Chávez in Germany."

"No offense intended."

Vélez waved him off.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Vélez asked Ruby.

"Not really, I imagine that I will go down there every now and then, but I had no hopes of getting assigned to run the school. What we really want is a good administrative officer to push paperwork, and a veteran senior enlisted man like Flores with real combat experience."

Vélez was glad that it was over. He had been worried that Ruby would become attached to his idea for the school.

"While Ruby is taking care of getting the school up and running, we are going to pair you up with Piccorelli. He is smart as hell and can help you deal with that money trail."

"Funny, I was trying to come up with an excuse to have him up here with us." Arocho said.

"I am guessing this is not going to be a problem, then?" Vélez asked.

"Not from us, Colonel," Arocho replied.

"One more thing, make sure that Caratini is in the list for the first class. Volunteer him yourself if you have to," Vélez ordered.

Julio César Piccorelli, now fully rested, was sitting at the international concourse of the Frankfurt Am Main international airport. He was leafing through a German car magazine while awaiting for the boarding call for his flight and was startled when someone threw a heavy green bag on the next seat.

Right as he was getting ready to curse, he looked up to see who had thrown the bag. Master Sergeant Marco Antonio Flores, US Army Retired, beamed at him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"They did not tell you? I got offered a job and couldn't turn it down!"

"Sweet. No more insurance sales for you?"

"Nah, it's always more fun to break stuff than to pay for it. By the way, we are on the same flight."

28

Flores turned out to be the perfect travel companion. Once in his seat, he took a pair of sleeping pills and spent most of the flight asleep. It was obvious to Piccorelli that Flores was a seasoned traveler. He was actually concerned when the flight attendants started to serve the mid-flight lunch, but they promised that they would save his meal in case he woke up before landing.

Flores woke up 45 minutes before landing. By the time he was back from the lavatory, his meal was waiting for him. He finished just in time for the captain to turn on the seatbelt lights as he started his initial descent to Atlanta/Hartsfield International Airport.

Piccorelli was more than a little nervous, since it was his first time back in the states since he slipped away from Virginia. Still, he was traveling on a Puerto Rican diplomatic passport, so there was not much they could do without making a mess.

To their amazement, they were back in the air in less than two hours, a personal record for both men in that particular airport. Flores went back to sleep, while Piccorelli spent the flight typing up the after action report for CDI. They were met by Major Arocho and Captain Ruby at the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan.

Captain Ruby left with Flores, to help him with his in-processing paperwork and to help getting him settled. Arocho took Piccorelli straight to CDI, where he would be debriefed by Lieutenant Colonel Vélez.

Piccorelli spent the next four hours telling and re-telling everything that happened in Germany, with special interest in Master Sergeant Marco Antonio Flores and his contribution to the success of the mission. Piccorelli knew that there was a purpose for the interrogation, they just wanted to be absolutely sure that they had as much detail as possible on everything that happened.

While Piccorelli was getting grilled, Flores was being pushed through the pipeline. Since the independence, the Military Relocation Act allowed former US-military of Puerto Rican descent to re-

locate to the island and join the local militia or the Puerto Rican Armed Forces at a similar rank. In addition, civil service granted certain privileges, like mortgage guarantees, scholarships and other goodies.

In less than two hours, Flores had been sworn-in as a Sergeant Major in the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico. His first duty was to run the still-secret special operations school. He already had gone through a quick physical exam, and even had time to pick up his mortgage warranty certificate, which meant he could walk into any bank in San Juan with just that piece of paper and his military identity card and they would offer him a low-interest mortgage on the spot.

Later in the afternoon his nephew, Lieutenant Colonel Vélez, picked him up and drove him to a private cemetery in Guaynabo so they could visit the family plot. Their extended family had been buried in that tract of land for the last 85 years.

Since Flores had been away from the island for so long, he asked for a rain check when his nephew invited him to a restaurant to celebrate his new enlistment and promotion. Instead they drove to the mountains of Ciales where they stuffed themselves with every kind of dish they sold as long as it was deep fried.

On the way back Vélez drove his uncle back to Fort Buchanan, and then went to CDI to get the daily summary and figure out how much of it could wait until the president's morning briefing. One of his jobs was to make sure that the president was properly informed without overwhelming him.

At 9:00 PM Vélez called the president at the presidential apartment.

"Yeah."

"Mister President, Sergeant Major Flores is set, he will be house hunting over the weekend. Captain Martínez will hand him over the school project tomorrow."

"Who is going to run the school?"

"Flores will. We'll have an officer on site to push paperwork, but the school is his."

"What is going to happen when a first lieutenant with diarrhea of the mouth decides he doesn't want to take orders from a sergeant?"

“Trainees won’t hold rank for the duration of training. Plus the sergeant major can eat first lieutenants for breakfast.”

Roth could detect more than a hint of pride.

“When do I meet him?”

“I’ll bring him over the weekend, if that’s OK with you mister President.”

“The first wife is at her mother’s this weekend. Bring Arocho, Ruby and Piccorelli too, we’ll grill some steaks and we all can drink too much beer and tell dirty stories.” Roth chuckled.

“Sunday afternoon sir?”

“Yup. Now go get some rest.”

Roth hung up before Vélez could say thanks.

Captain Ruby, in civvies and driving an armored Suburban, picked up Sergeant Major Flores at his temporary housing, a two-bedroom townhouse a couple of streets away from Colonel’s Row. He was wearing the new US Army ACU⁵⁰ with the proper ARPR insignia.

“Sergeant Major, where the hell did you get that uniform at?”

“The US Army still buys their uniforms from factories in the island. I called them and convinced them to redirect their next load. It is sitting in my living room and I bet there’s got to be some that will fit you.”

“Shit, I like you already. And here I was worried about handing over my baby to you!”

“You were the one that wrote the plan? What did you do before this?”

Ruby turned his forearm so Flores could see his tattoos. One showed a cartoon seal smoking a cigar and holding a trident. Another one looked very similar to the Anheuser-Busch coat of arms found in every bottle of Budweiser beer.

“Seal?”

Ruby nodded.

“Did they show you my record?”

“Yeah.”

⁵⁰ Army Combat Uniform, the next generation of uniforms designed for the US Army. These uniforms have a new kind of camouflage pattern that easily blends in different kinds of terrain, so the same pattern works in wooded areas, desert, urban areas and even snow.

“The sealed one?”

“What sealed one?”

Flores pulled out a brown envelope . It took Ruby a split second to recognize the envelope.

“Jesus Christ, how the fuck did you get your hands on that?”

“When there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Smart ass. Do I get to read it?”

“Sure, but you are paying for our breakfast, after all, you outrank me.”

Ruby and Flores had a quiet breakfast. Ruby read the classified (and obviously stolen) version of the 201⁵¹ file of Master Sergeant Marco Antonio Flores, while Flores read Ruby’s plan for the creation of a special operations school in Puerto Rico. Every now and then each man looked up and sized up the other. It was obvious that they both thought along similar lines and Flores found very little to disagree with Ruby’s plan.

Ruby was just awed with all the crazy shit that Flores got away with while in the Army. He was even more amazed that he managed to keep it all quiet. Anonymity was one of the most coveted possessions of a special operator. After breakfast was over (and they argued about the tip), Ruby handed the 201 file back to Flores and told him he would take him to CDI to show him around, then for a tour of the training facilities scattered throughout the island.

At CDI he was issued special id cards since he would be pulling double duty between ARPR and CDI. Everyone was delighted with his new uniform, and the bartering game quickly started. Flores had “diverted” fifty ACU uniform sets. He kept three for himself and three for his nephew. Ruby would pick three for himself and three for Arocho, so that left him 38 sets to be traded for goods and favors.

The old timers at the CDI agreed that Sergeant Major Flores looked like a fucking recruiting poster, and maybe that would rub off on the younger soldiers that so far showed almost no military discipline. And he had character too, the way an old soldier should. The old timers immediately decided that Sergeant Major Flores would be accepted into their little weekly domino and poker games.

⁵¹ Department of the Army form 201, the standard personnel records folder.

Flores was delighted when the “old goats” invited him for the Saturday game.

Since the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico was so small, the old officer’s club in Fort Buchanan was declared a combined club. The younger crowd preferred junk food, but the old goats had already discovered the wonders of healthy eating, so at lunch time they dragged Flores over to the club, where they spent the next hour exchanging gossip while they made a brave effort to attack their salads.

On his way back to CDI, Flores realized that he had forgotten to ask Ruby about going to check on the training sites. Right before he walked into the first security checkpoint, he heard the blades of a helicopter about to land. He did not need to look up to know that it was a Blackhawk.

Flores was very pleased by everything he had seen so far. The senior enlisted obviously knew what the hell they were doing. The juniors were as dumb as lower enlisted and officers all over the world, but that could be fixed with the proper training. The officers were rank heavy and the median age was terribly low, but again, nothing that couldn’t be cured with a strong body of senior enlisted men and women.

Flores was an ambitious man. He figured out that if Ruby could write from scratch the plan for the special forces school, then nothing would stop him from doing similar things. They were pretty much autonomous and felt almost no pressure from above to stick to a specific doctrine, mostly since ARPR was so young that it had yet to develop its own unique way of doing things.

This presented Flores with a unique situation. Once the school was up and running he could just sit back and enjoy a few more years in a cushy billet. Or he could move on and try to come up with something else new.

Ruby, now changed into his brand-new ACU, was waiting for him to leave for their tour.

“Who do I ask for about getting a sidearm assigned?”

“The official party line is that they don’t like to see soldiers walking around with weapons. Unofficially, we all carry. I’ll take you to

the armorer.”

29

Captain Ruby drove Sergeant Major Flores to one of the most remote parts of the base where the firing ranges were located. The ranges were conveniently located next door to the rod-and-gun club, which had its own gun shop, and the base armory. They walked into the armory first.

The only person in the front room was a girl that both men guessed couldn't be one year older than 18. The girl was First Lieutenant Milagros "Millie" Robles, and she was actually 32 years old. Millie was sort of a legend in ARPR, and she was the designated officer in charge of the armory.

"Hi Millie," said Ruby.

"Captain Ruby in my lair! What are you trying to steal from me?"

"Let me introduce Sergeant Major Flores, the new school principal."

They shook hands.

"You are the armorer?" Flores asked, still having a hard time believing the insanity of leaving a baby in charge of a military armory.

"Yes she is," Ruby explained. Our Millie is very special. Her dad was a Navy chief machinist and she has been around firearms since she was 9 years old. She is a mechanical engineer and can build all sorts of crazy contraptions from a solid block of metal. Oh, and we stole her from U.D.T.⁵²

"No shit?"

Lieutenant Robles was beaming.

"You look like you are 14 years old at the most," Flores told her.

"I will take that as a compliment. What would you like to have?"

"Just like that?"

"Rank has its benefits. People that are lower in the totem pole get either an M-16A3 or a M-4, and if they kiss ass a lot, maybe a 9mm Beretta."

"What else you got?"

"This place is crammed with goodies. What do you like to shoot?"

52 Underwater Demolitions Team, another name for the US Navy Seals.

“For tactical I like the Heckler & Koch MP5/10, suppressed if you have it. Also I need something I can carry around, 10mm too if possible.”

Lieutenant Robles nodded, turned around and walked into her storeroom. She was back less than a minute later with two Zero Halliburton⁵³ cases. She opened both and turned them around so both men could see the contents. One held two H&K MP5/10 submachine guns. The second case held three Sig Sauer SP2340 pistols, one each chambered for .357, .40 and 9mm calibers.

Flores was immediately drawn to the H&Ks.

“See which ones you like the best, they have been customized for balance and trigger pull.”

Flores field stripped each weapon, checked obvious points of wear, then put it back together and dry-fired it a few times. He barely paid attention to the pistols.

“Can I shoot them? They are almost identical.”

“Sure, come on in.”

The two men followed the armorer to the back of the storage area, where there was a stairwell that led to an underground shooting range.

“Only a very few people are allowed to shoot down here, just so you know,” Ruby explained.

Over the next hour Flores tested the two MP5s and the three pistols. The pistol choice was simple: he wanted the 10mm. As for the submachine guns, he still could not tell them apart. He asked for both, expecting Lieutenant Robles to tell him to go to hell. She actually said yes.

Bingo.

“Where are we cleaning these?” Flores asked.

“You are not cleaning any of our weapons,” she replied. “We got plenty of people here to do that. Come back in a few hours and we’ll have them clean and ready.”

“What do I carry for the time being?”

“You can sign for a Beretta 9mm, is that OK”

⁵³ A very light and sturdy case with an almost indestructible aluminum outer shell, and with foam inserts designed to snugly fit weapons, cameras or other equipment that needs to be protected or secured.

“I feel naked if I am walking around in uniform without carrying.”

Both Ruby and Robles knew the feeling.

On their way back to the Suburban, Flores asked Ruby what did he carry. Ruby lifted the back of his uniform shirt, where he could see he had a Colt 1911 pistol. Ruby opened the rear hatch of the Suburban and showed Robles the rest of his arsenal. The rear cargo area floor was raised by 18 inches and held a concealed gun safe. When pulled open, it showed drawers that held enough Kevlar vests (with ballistic ceramic inserts), Kevlar helmets, elbow pads and knee pads for four people. Additional drawers held riot shotguns, M-4 carbines and two Heckler & Koch MP/10s literally identical to the two that Flores had just picked.

“Those two look similar.”

“I would rather carry that than a shotgun.”

“Yea, me too.”

“What about ammo?”

“There’s an extra drawer with every kind of ammo that we use. There are even a few slugs and bean bags for the shotguns.”

“Nice, I think bean bags are a gift from God.”

Ruby smiled.

“By the way, these Suburbans are armored, and they have ammo stores concealed in the doors. If you are ever caught in a shootout, pull the ammo off the doors first so you can save whatever you are carrying on your body.”

“Who do I have to kill to get one of these trucks?”

“Nobody. You rank one, it is being fitted for the gun safe system as we speak. Act surprised when they show it to you.”

“OK, I will.”

They drove back to CDI, where they had a Blackhawk reserved for the rest of the day. First they flew to the Lincoln Military Academy, just five miles away. The training grounds were not much, but it was a convenient area to do screening tests for potential candidates. Next they flew to the University of Puerto Rico’s main campus in Rio Piedras, which had a US Army ROTC program for many decades. Their training areas were still in place, and again, the area

was at a very accessible location.

Next they flew to the Police Academy in Gurabo. This was the most modern facility to date, and they agreed that they would either use what they had or copy their layout at a different location. From Gurabo they flew to the abandoned US Navy base at Roosevelt Roads, on the east coast of the island. The base had been shut down as punishment for the political pressure that eventually forced the US Navy to shut down their naval gunnery range at Vieques island. President Roth had ordered the re-utilization plans frozen as soon as he was sworn into office. The base had a very good infrastructure and it was a shame to slice it up.

Roosevelt Roads was great. It had two airports, naval facilities, physical training areas and a few firing ranges. They had hundreds of buildings that could be turned into a huge urban warfare training center.

"The Americans don't have anything this big," stated Captain Ruby.

"Nope, they don't," Flores replied. "They have gigantic bases, but their mock up areas are tiny when compared to this."

"We should offer it to them in exchange for training," Flores added.

"What we do is we set the school, then we call them in and show them a demo. If they like it, we'll offer them a cross-training deal. For every warm body they send to us for training, they have to take one of ours."

"That would work," Ruby said. "It means we don't have to pay for airborne training, and they get themselves a cheap urban and jungle warfare training area for free."

"When we get back we need to go over the plans and expand. I think we are onto something."

From Roosevelt Roads they flew to Fort Allen, which during the US Commonwealth years had been the official training center for the Puerto Rico Army National Guard. They did a quick fly-over of the perimeter, then landed at the old softball field that was right across the street from the holding center. Ruby wanted to show him the holding cells and interrogation rooms, which would be very useful for psychological operations training.

Captain Ruby made no mention of the identity of the only detainee still at the facility, which was fine since Flores did not want to know. They drove around and noticed that the infrastructure was not in as good a shape as Roosevelt Roads.

"This is going to start adding up really quick. How is our funding?" Flores asked.

"As long as you don't buy \$800 toilet seats, you'll be fine."

"OK, just checking. But yeah, this is going to cost a pretty penny. How many sites we got left?"

"We are going to do a fly-over at Ramey Air Base, then back to Buchanan."

"Good, I am too old to be running around like this all day long."

After the fly-over, they returned to Fort Buchanan. As soon as they walked into the operations center, the watch commander told Flores that Lieutenant Colonel Vélez wanted to see them at his office. The two men walked across the operations floor and into the administration area. A secretary waved them into the office of the director.

Lieutenant Colonel Ramiro Vélez, the CDI director, was oblivious to their presence. Whatever he was reading off his computer screen had his complete attention. After a very long minute, he looked up and was startled to see Rudy and Flores standing at attention in front of his desk.

"Nice threads uncle, where did you find those uniforms?"

"I know a guy that knows a guy that knows a guy. I got three sets for you, we'll bring them here later."

"C'mon uncle, sit down, you too Ruby."

Both men sat down.

"What do you think of Millie?"

"She is a piece of work."

"Yes she is. You earned a lot of points when you picked the 10mm."

"I know her dad," Flores said.

"Small world," Vélez replied.

"From where?" Ruby asked.

"He is in the weapons board over at Fort Bragg."

"What's that?" Vélez asked.

"It's a joint service team that spends all day playing with new weapons," Flores explained. "He is sort of a legend up there, he is a genius at tuning weapons."

Vélez took out his dog tag chain, which had two keys hanging off it. He unlocked his top desk drawer and pulled out a small leather folder and a passport, then tossed both to Flores. The folder held a police-type shield and an identification card.

"Those are your CDI credentials. These will get you into any restricted area in the island except maybe President Roth's bathroom. The passport is diplomatic, you can only use it if you leave the island on official business. For personal travel we recommend you use your American passport."

He reached once more into his drawer and tossed Flores a key ring.

"Those are the keys to your official car, which is almost a carbon copy of the ones that Arocho and Ruby drive. Your weapons are already locked in the back safe area. The combination is penciled in your passport. Please memorize it and erase it off the passport."

Flores nodded.

"Can I have a minute with my uncle?" Vélez asked Ruby.

"Sure, I'll be at the ops center."

"Sorry I can't find the time to help you in-process and show you the facilities."

"Don't sweat it, I actually had a lot of fun."

"What are you doing this weekend?"

"I am playing domino with the old goats on Saturday, plus I have an appointment with a Realtor."

"Sunday?"

"Nothing."

"On Sunday we are all invited to go hang out with the president. Informal get together, nothing more."

"Any way I can slip out of that?"

"Not really."

"OK, I guess I am going."

"We'll pick you up at noon."

30

**Mayaguez,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Julio César Piccorelli was not looking forward to his weekend, since as soon as he had arrived from Germany he was informed that he had volunteered to help with the efforts to trace the fortune that had been stolen from the Venezuelan treasury by former president Hugo Chávez. He was starting to feel annoyed at having to pay rent for an apartment that he barely got to live in.

It did not help that his apartment building was so close to the student district that he could hear the all-night partying from two blocks away. He started considering that maybe he was already too old for the student scene and it was time for him to rent a house a couple of miles farther away from El Colegio.

Piccorelli decided to go out for a walk, since he knew he would spend the rest of the weekend glued to a computer monitor. He walked up McKinley street, then turned the corner and wandered down Méndez Vigo street until he found the old *Ricomini* bakery. He was hoping to keep on walking but the rich smell of fresh baked bread was too much to resist.

Piccorelli had been a patron of the *Ricomini* bakery during his college years, and he had developed an addiction for their bitter espresso. He used to feel guilty about paying \$1 for a cup of coffee, until he moved to Virginia and discovered that the same coffee would cost him \$3 or worse. He decided he would drink \$3 worth of coffee for his breakfast.

One newspaper, two cheese pastries and three cups of espresso later, Piccorelli headed back to his apartment, feeling his head buzzing from the caffeine and sugar assault. He walked back to his apartment and was startled when he found Captain Arocho, in civvies, sitting in his living room, reading a car magazine.

Piccorelli did not bother to ask him how he got into the apartment.

“How long have you been waiting?”

“15 minutes tops. I drove straight into CCT before realizing that it was a Saturday and almost nobody would be there.”

“What’s going on?”

“Roth ordered Colonel Vélez to track down the millions that Chávez stole from his treasury. Vélez turned around and gave me the job.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“You just got promoted,” Arocho said as he handed him a small leather folder.

Piccorelli opened it, it had a shield, his picture and a card that identified Julio César Piccorelli as a special agent of the CDI.

“I thought I made it clear that I would work as a civilian.”

“You are. This is to make your job easier. People tend to question you less when you flash them a badge. It’s some kind of subliminal authority thing.”

“I see. So what now?”

“All your projects go to the back burner until we take a shot at finding that money. You better start delegating work if you have something that is anywhere close to critical.”

“I was getting ready to start a second parallel computing cluster elsewhere in the island. It makes me nervous to have all of our computing power under the same roof.”

“Anything else?”

“I have some kids from El Colegio rewriting the software module used for the long range communications interceptor. They think they can make it run an order of magnitude more efficiently.”

“You can hand those to somebody else, right?”

“Yeah, the parallel computing cluster uses off-the-shelf hardware, and we already wrote the software. As for the college kids, they already have a CCT team leader.”

“OK, it is official then. Do you know anyone in the banking industry?”

“Not directly, but I know a guy from the mathematics faculty, he writes financial forecasting simulations for stock and bond markets, commodities, the works. He is shopping around for investors for a start-up.”

“Call this guy and tell him he has a funding presentation on Mon-

day at 9:00 AM sharp at CCT.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. What’s going to happen is he will probably get a government grant to start his company in exchange for a certain level of cooperation with CCT and maybe CDI.”

“Nice!”

“See if you can find anyone else that deals with banking stuff. Oh, and don’t make plans for tomorrow, we are having steaks and beer with President Roth.”

“You want me to drive two hours to get plastered on my day off?”

“You are not driving, an ARPR Blackhawk will be doing rappelling training in the old ROTC training area at the campus. They’ll pick you up and drop you at Fort Buchanan.”

“That will do, thanks.” Piccorelli did not sound sincere.

“Cheer up, President Roth is a normal guy like the rest of us. He wants the team together to thank them for a job well done, plus his wife is away, so he probably feels a bit lonely up by himself at La Fortaleza.”

Sergeant Major Flores spent his morning driving around the outskirts of the San Juan Metropolitan area, looking mostly at houses in gated communities. When crime rates went out of control during the mid 1980’s and early 90’s, the housing market quickly reacted by turning all new developments into suburban fortresses with better perimeter security than Fort Buchanan, and with off-duty policemen providing security. Streets were laid in seemingly random weaving patterns that broke the traditional grid-like arrangement of older developments. It also made it much harder to drive faster than 10 miles per hour.

Flores did not really give a shit about the enhanced security. He just liked the gated communities because of the strict noise control, and he wanted some peace and quiet. In less than four hours he had already narrowed down his list to three possible locations, all on the southern edge of the metro area. He told his Realtor that he would pick one by Monday morning so he could get his offer started.

The Realtor was already calculating his fee based on the three possible candidates. The houses were within current market trends,

but so far Flores had been very easy to deal with, which was not always the case. He would rather pick a lower fee for an easier closing, than sell a multi-million dollar property to some prima donna that would make his life hell for the next month or so.

Flores drove up to Palo Seco, the fishermen town across San Juan bay from the *El Morro*⁵⁴ fortress. He had a light lunch at one of the great little seafood restaurants, and then drove over the causeway to *Isla de Cabras*⁵⁵. The tiny island was used mostly for recreation. In addition to its tiny Spanish fortress, *El Cañuelo*, it had an abandoned leper colony, now in ruins, plus the main firing range for the state police. After a leisurely walk around the public side of the island, Flores drove over to Fort Buchanan, to see if he could catch the domino game with the old goats.

He had gambled by taking the light lunch, and it paid off. When he arrived at the game, in Colonel's row, he realized that they had laid out almost a mini-banquet. The old goats obviously liked to eat well because they had trays with roasted pork, fried chicken, fried pork rinds, plus what seemed to be every possible kind of rice recipe that could be found in the island. Everyone he saw was holding a beer bottle, and he noticed a makeshift bar with mostly Puerto Rican rums, pineapple and orange juice and a few liters of Coca Cola.

Flores had a hard time convincing himself that these were the same people that were force-feeding him salads at the Buchanan consolidated club.

Flores was trying to figure out how the hell a few guys could expect to eat all that food, when he noticed children screaming and giggling. He walked around the back of the house and noticed that they were actually three parties going on. At the front of the house, in the carport, the men were playing dominoes. In the back, the children were having a ball, and in the back porch, the women were having their own get-together.

That made Flores feel much better about the whole deal. He made the rounds and was introduced to the wives and kids of the old goats, then ate as much as he could possibly do without getting sick. He did not touch the alcohol.

⁵⁴ Fuerte San Felipe del Morro, the biggest Spanish-built fortress in the Americas.

⁵⁵ Goat Island.

When the party disbanded in the early evening, there was no worry about drunk drivers. Everyone lived on the same street, so the only one that had to drive was Flores, still stone sober, and only for a block or so.

On Sunday morning Lieutenant Colonel Vélez called Sergeant Major Flores to tell him that regretfully, he would have to drive himself to La Fortaleza. This was not really a problem to Flores, he liked to drive and he was still breaking in his brand new armored Suburban.

Piccorelli had decided to drive early to the campus to watch the training exercise. He was awed at how easy and trivial they made it look as the men rappelled off the helicopter and onto the top of the victory tower, which by itself was 40 feet tall. The process was repeated a half dozen times, mostly as a recruiting tool, since they wanted to see how many of the college kids would eventually volunteer to join ARPR after graduation.

Once the exercise was completed, the ARPR troops graciously allowed the students to roam around the helicopter, pose for photos and ask about what it was like to serve in the Army of the Republic. The pilot was a Chief Warrant Officer that had transferred in grade from the US Army, where he flew medical evacuation helicopters at the US Army Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany. He had been deployed for combat in Afghanistan, Iraq and Macedonia, the last one under the United Nations.

The pilot walked over to where Piccorelli was standing and asked him to show his CDI badge. The pilot reached into a hip pocket in his flight suit and pulled out a similar badge.

“Check this out.”

The pilot put the two badges side-by-side. After about half a second, Piccorelli heard a “beep” and saw a green light flash on either badge.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Our badges carry an embedded microchip. When you put two or more together they will send an encrypted code. It is a cheap and reliable way to authenticate the badges.”

“That’s the coolest thing I have seen since I got here. Honest.”

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

Lieutenant Colonel Vélez was about to leave for La Fortaleza when he had a flashback to his childhood. He remembered how on special occasions his family would drive out to the hills of Guaynabo to a bakery owned by a Spaniard expatriate. The Spaniard was a legend in the San Juan culinary circles and was widely known as the best pastry chef in the island. Vélez decided to take a detour and pick up some pastry for the president. His father had taught him to never show up at somebody's house without a small edible gift like fresh fruit or vegetables from your own garden, or maybe some local cheese or pastry.

Major Arocho and Captain Ruby were riding together and made it across the Condado lagoon bridge before they realized that they were going to walk in empty-handed. They turned around and headed to Hato Rey, and with amazing efficiency located two bottles of 30-year old scotch. They debated about picking up something to eat, but decided that the booze was more than enough.

Sergeant Major Flores had just left Fort Buchanan when he realized that this was the first Sunday he had spent in the island in many years. And Sundays meant one thing: horse races. He drove around until he found a gas station that displayed the logo of the Puerto Rico Horse Racing Commission, which was present in all establishments licensed to take bets through an electronic system identical to the ones used for lottery tickets. He placed his \$1 bet mostly out of sentimental reasons, since he could still remember driving every Sunday with his father to place his bets. His father usually spent \$10 per week, and he always let him pick one of the races.

Flores placed his bet at random, then drove away.

President Roth had left specific instructions with the social secretary, and by mid-morning the living room in the presidential apartments was turned into a sports lovers' paradise. Three flat screen, high-definition televisions were hung from the book cases, with direct feeds to two separate college football games. The third television was set to CNN.

The food arrangements would be a little more complex: it was tradition that policemen on shift were welcome to eat at La Fort-

aleza's main dining room. The word spread that they would be grilling steaks on the terrace, so they had to make sure that they had enough cooks and supplies on hand as to surprise the guys who were working on Sunday with a nice steak grilled to order. The only thing that would be off limits was the booze.

The men started arriving at Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport around mid-morning. They arrived in pairs, most of them dressed like young executives on the way to a golf retreat. Each carried a day bag and nothing else.

They left the airport as quickly as they arrived.

The men assembled at three major points around San Juan. The first group was driven to the Punta Salinas public beach. The second group met at the parking lot of Plaza Las Americas shopping mall. The last group was driven to a private hangar at Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicci Airport⁵⁶.

In each case, the men were provided with dyed-black military fatigues and foot gear, Kevlar vests, M-16 rifles and fragmentation grenades. They were also handed encrypted headsets and small GPS receivers.

The men did not waste time. Once they were fully equipped they jumped into the backs of identical Ford Econoline vans. Three vans, each with just a driver, no front passenger and six well-armed men in the rear, drove into *Puerta de Tierra*⁵⁷ and the Luis Muñoz Rivera park. The three vans parked side by side and the men used their encrypted headsets to do one last check.

⁵⁶ Named after US Air Force Captain Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicci, who was killed in action while he was flying a F-111 "Aardvark" fighter-bomber during the US attacks against Libya in 1986. He was awarded the Purple Heart and posthumously promoted to Major.

⁵⁷ The area in San Juan island where the San Cristóbal fortress and the Puerto Rican capitol are located. It is named after one of the gates in the old San Juan fortress walls.

Flores was the first to arrive at La Fortaleza. He parked by the sunken gardens, took a leather-bound book from his front passenger seat and decided to leave his pistol locked in the Suburban. He could smell that the grills had been fired up already.

Vélez was driving along San Francisco street, cursing at how it was already too much crowded with tourists and street vendors. At least he was not in a hurry, after all, it was just an informal party.

Arocho and Ruby were stuck in traffic and still on Muñoz Rivera Avenue. They couldn't see what was the deal with the traffic since there was a cargo van in front of their Suburban.

"We haven't moved in 15 minutes, I am walking up there to see what the fuck is going on." Protested Ruby.

"You carrying?" Asked Arocho.

Ruby lifted his shirt and showed him his concealed holster with what looked like a Sig Sauer .40 pistol.

"You?" Ruby asked.

Arocho showed him his own Sig Sauer.

"Let's do this."

Ruby and Arocho walked on opposite sides of the van, and noticed there were two more vans ahead.

Arocho knocked on the driver's window. The driver shrugged his shoulders as if he did not understand him, so Arocho pulled out his CDI shield and showed it to him. The driver rolled his window down.

"Can I help you officer?"

"Where are you going?"

"Delivery to La Fortaleza."

"Three vans? On a Sunday morning? Let me see the manifest."

The driver reached down for a binder that was tucked between the seats. As he reached down, Arocho peeked into the back and noticed some movement in the shadows.

Ruby had been standing on the passenger side, on the mirror

blind spot so the driver had not noticed him standing. He thought he heard something in the back. Then he saw something reflected on the right rear view mirror.

Ruby screamed “ROLLBACK ROLLBACK” and ran back to the back of the Suburban after making sure that he had pulled open both doors on the right side. Arocho heard him the first time and ducked a split second before a shotgun was fired through the driver’s window. He too ran to the back of the Suburban, where Ruby had already opened their safe and was pulling out their Kevlar vests and his two Heckler & Koch MP5/10 sub machine guns.

Both men had been superbly trained, so they did not need to talk to each other to know what had to be done. The rear doors of the van flew open and whoever was in there started shooting towards them. The Suburban was fully armored and was rated as being able to stop fired rounds up to 50mm in diameter. The 5.56MM rounds used by the M-16s being shot at them barely made a dent on the armored glass, engine compartment and door panels.

Ruby and Arocho, now wearing vests and each carrying a H&K MP5/10, prepared to return fire when they heard the screech of tires. Both men could hear people screaming in terror, probably the tourists and street vendors that clogged the sidewalks at this time of the day.

“Shit, there is more than one van,” Ruby said.

Arocho speed-dialed Vélez, who was about to pull into La Fortaleza when he heard the first shot fired. Vélez slammed on the gas and rode the last few feet into the compound, then screamed for the guards, to close the heavy iron gates.

Vélez sensed movement and turned around as he pulled his Beretta service pistol. It was Sergeant Major Flores, now wearing a Kevlar helmet and jacket, and carrying a H&K MP5/10.

“How long you been here?” Vélez asked his uncle as he opened his own truck safe and started suiting up.”

“Not even five minutes. When I heard the shots I just walked to the back and started strapping up everything I could grab.”

Vélez felt his cell phone vibrating as he was strapping on the Kevlar helmet. He struggled to stick the cell phone under the helmet.

“Uncle, call FURA, it is on your speed dial.”

“Vélez,” he answered into his phone. He heard gun fire over the phone.

“Ruby and Arocho here, we are pinned behind a white van with unknown number of hostiles. They have shot at us with M-16s and shotguns. No wounded or dead yet. And I think there are at least two more vans headed your way.”

“We locked down the place, and the Sergeant Major is here with me, he is on the phone with FURA.”

“Anyone from the team out here?”

“Piccorelli is on an ARPR chopper on the way to Buchanan, everyone else is at CDI or off-duty.”

“Just make sure that FURA doesn’t shoot at us by accident. I gotta go.”

Arocho hung up.

Vélez left Flores in charge of the ground force, about a dozen young policemen, none of them with more than five years in the force. Flores did not hesitate and started barking orders to the men, who were obviously scared out of their minds but grateful that they had somebody that at least sounded like he knew what the hell he was doing.

Vélez ran into the building and up the stairs into the presidential apartments. He was pleased to see that the president’s bodyguards were faring much better than the kids down in the courtyard.

They even asked him for his ID.

President Roth was no stranger to violence, but he was more annoyed than scared. At least his wife was on the other side of the island, and his kid was probably still asleep in the arms of whatever bimbo he had picked up on Friday night.

By the time Vélez walked into the president’s study, somebody at CDI had enabled the urban surveillance camera network and was starting to send them live video feeds from most of the streets leading to La Fortaleza. They could see that there were two more vans, slowly making their way through the clogged street, most of the times by running over the sidewalk cafés.

A second camera showed Ruby and Arocho taking cover behind

their Suburban.

“Smart guys, they left the doors open to add more layers of armoring,” Roth commented.

“Yes sir, it’s a preset drill. Watch what they are about to do.”

Arocho made a hand signal to Ruby, and Ruby replied with a thumbs up. They had yet to return a single shot. Arocho counted to three with his right hand, and on three both men ducked while Arocho reached up into the rear gate inner door panel and pulled a lever.

The lever actuated shaped blocks of explosive placed in strategic points around the front windshield and the four side windows. The result was a series of muffled explosions that ejected each of the windows and the windshield.

Arocho and Ruby had trained for this situation a few times. They were in close quarters and at a stalemate. They could not shoot at their attackers without losing cover. By blowing the windows their attackers would be taken by surprise, since they had already wasted ammo shooting into these windows.

Before the last window had blown up, Arocho and Ruby stood up and started shooting in steady and well-aimed 3-round bursts. First to fall was the driver, who had stepped out and to the left of the van. Ruby hit two of the men in the rear.

The others ducked.

Piccorelli had enjoyed his first helicopter flight until he was told about the situation unfolding right outside La Fortaleza. Before he could ask what were they going to do, he was thrown a flak jacket and a Kevlar helmet. The crew chief unstrapped their two on-board machine guns, hooked them into their door mounts and showed Piccorelli how to flip the safety and the charging handle, then hooked his harness to the gun mount on the port side.

The ARPR Blackhawk had enough fuel to stay up at least another hour, and they planned on spend every god damn minute they could on patrol above La Fortaleza, at least until the situation was under control.

As they flew across San Juan bay, they noticed the two FURA helicopters assigned to the San Juan area as they screamed above the

rooftops, with sharpshooters sitting on both sides of their opened doors. One of the FURA helicopters would go to help Arocho and Ruby take care of their van, while the ARPR Blackhawk and the second FURA helicopter would help protect La Fortaleza.

Arocho and Ruby were now sure that they had at least three more shooters to deal with, all of them still shooting M-16s. The screams had subsided, obviously the tourists and locals both new the value of discretion over valor.

Arocho could barely see that one of the men was trying to get into the driver's seat of the van. He dropped to the floor and shot at their tires. By luck he hit the rear differential of the van, which was almost disintegrated after getting hit by his two three-round bursts of 10mm ammo.

"That van is going nowhere, I just blew their differential."

"They can still run up the street. Why the fuck are they still there?"

"Maybe they are hit."

Ruby was the first to hear the helicopter as it approached.

"About god damn time," he said, actually grateful of knowing that help was on the way. He had not counted on any help coming from the rear, since people had run out of their cars and made it impossible for other police cars to come to them from Puerta de Tierra.

The other two vans had arrived at La Fortaleza. Their drivers and rear passengers spilled out, taking cover behind parked cars and started shooting through the wrought iron gate. The policemen inside, led by Sergeant Major Flores, had taken cover and were waiting for orders. Flores told them to stand fast.

Upstairs, President Roth wanted to take a peek at the situation, but his own bodyguard made it clear that he would hit him in the head with the stock of his shotgun if he even attempted to get too close to a window.

Vélez already had made contact with ARPR and with the ports authority. A second ARPR helicopter was dispatched to San Juan, while all airports and shipping ports shut down for civilian traffic.

Piccorelli could clearly see the shooters, and he also noticed po-

Pulling Strings

licemen desperately trying to clear the streets so the patrol cars could make it to La Fortaleza. The pilot warned that he would make a sharp turn and then sweep over the shooters, and told the crew chief and Piccorelli to be prepared to shoot at the two vans.

Piccorelli's felt the taste of bile as the Blackhawk swept over the area in front of La Fortaleza.

What's that pinging sound? Are they shooting at us? Holy shit!

He heard the crew chief as he started to shoot at the attackers. He heard an explosion, then more shooting.

The crew chief suddenly stopped shooting.

Piccorelli turned around and saw that the crew chief was slumped over the gun. He called the pilot on the intercom.

"I am going to turn around so you are the one facing them," said the pilot. "Shoot in small bursts, no more than a second or two so the gun doesn't overheat."

The helicopter turned in a figure-8 pattern, and Piccorelli's side was now facing the firefight. He hesitated for a second, but then he heard more pinging. He pulled the trigger.

The first bullets hit the pavement, he could easily see the ancient Spanish bricks shatter. He adjusted a little bit and pulled the trigger again. The bullets hit the second van. He kept shooting into it until it erupted into a fireball.

The FURA helicopter that was sweeping above Arocho and Ruby dropped half of its squad of troopers atop a house half a block away, and then took off again. The two FURA troopers used their vantage position to report on the situation down the road. They could barely see the three men still shooting at Arocho and Ruby. When they checked it with binoculars, they noticed that one of the men had grenades hooked into his belt.

They called in their helicopter for directions. The team commander did not hesitate, they couldn't let these grenades to come into action. He ordered the two men to engage as needed, then called it in to the tactical command post.

Arocho and Ruby had pulled out from their covered position behind the Suburban. It was obvious that the three remaining shooters would not run away.

Arocho's phone buzzed.

“Yeah,” he said.

“FURA tactical ops, we put two guys on a rooftop half a block ahead of you. Two story colonial house, the first floor is a jewelry store.”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“The guys say your perps have grenades.”

“Shit. And your guys can’t shoot until we move, we don’t want to get caught in the crossfire.”

“Yeah.”

“OK. We are pretty much alone here, everyone else hauled ass when the first shot was fired. We are going to pull out again and tuck ourselves behind the corner. Tell your guys to let it rip.”

“Roger.”

On cue, Arocho started to fire, to cover Ruby’s sprint behind the next corner. Ruby took position and started to fire, so Arocho could run and take cover too.

The three remaining attackers were too busy trying to sneak around the Suburban to notice that Ruby and Arocho had moved. The two FURA troopers now had a clean line of fire and did not waste it. Neither trooper missed his first shot. There was now only one attacker left.

The attacker dove into the ground and started to crawl underneath the Suburban.

After two more passes above the smoking vans, Piccorelli stopped noticing the shots that kept hitting the helicopter. By pure luck nobody else in the Blackhawk had been hit.

He could clearly see four men, all dressed in black, sprawled on pools of blood between the burning hulks of the two vans. The rest of the attackers were still firing into La Fortaleza, but almost to no effect. Piccorelli could now see at least two groups of policemen in full riot gear taking position at their rear.

The idiots are about to get pinned down, he thought.

32

The last remaining of the attackers on the van that was left behind decided that he was not ready to get killed. He opened his M-16 by pushing one of the two retaining pins, which let the bottom receiver group hinge down. He pulled down the bolt group, disassembled it and threw the bolt, charging handle and firing pin towards the corner where Arocho and Ruby were hiding.

Next he threw the bottom receiver. He had pretty much made his weapon useless. He stood up and with exaggerated motions (to show he was not being hostile), he took off his equipment belts, which held a knife, radio and a few grenades. He then walked slowly, hands up.

The two FURA troopers now had a clear shot, but they could not shoot it as long as he was unarmed.

Arocho and Ruby were no longer alone. They had a half dozen policemen from the Capitol detachment, in full riot gear. When the man started walking to them with his hands raised, Arocho sent two of the policemen to take him down. They quickly sprinted and tackled him down.

The man did not resist as he was cuffed. Within minutes he was carried back to a patrol car and driven away to the main police headquarters in Hato Rey.

At about the same time, the last three attackers at La Fortaleza turned themselves in. Piccorelli's Blackhawk left for San Pablo hospital in Bayamon, which was closer than the Centro Medico in Rio Piedras.

Arocho and Ruby spent the rest of the afternoon working with the forensics technicians as they tried to reconstruct the scene. It was widely accepted as a miracle that not a single civilian was killed or wounded. The press had been allowed back into Old San Juan, where they reported that an unknown number of gunmen had attempted to attack La Fortaleza. By the time the news reached CNN, everyone started reporting it as a failed coup.

President Roth allowed an impromptu press conference.

"I will read a statement, then we will allow some questions," President Roth started.

"This morning around 10:45am, two officers of the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico dismounted their official vehicle to check on the cause of a traffic jam right past the Capitol and heading into Old San Juan. The officers noticed three suspicious cargo vehicles. When they asked the drivers of one of these vehicles for his cargo manifest, the driver of the vehicle reached for a shotgun and tried to shoot the officer. The two officers returned to their vehicle to take cover and to report the attack. The other two vehicles sped away and tried to get into La Fortaleza. Thanks to the quick thinking of this officer, La Fortaleza had plenty of time to lock down and prepare for the attack. One helicopter of the Army of the Republic of Puerto Rico, and two helicopters from FURA provided critical support to our defensive measures, and were instrumental in our success. Regretfully, the crew chief of the Army helicopter was killed by small arms fire from these attackers. We will release his name after his next of kin have been notified."

"As of this moment, the Police is investigating this as a terrorist attack. Four of the attackers survived and are currently being held at the police headquarters in Hato Rey. Six attackers were killed in Puerta de Tierra, and thirteen attackers were killed right outside the gates of La Fortaleza. Not a single civilian was wounded or killed. Questions?"

"Mister President, has anyone taken credit for the attack?"

"No."

"Mister President, how can you be sure this was not an attempt at a coup?"

"A coup involves more than just removing the head of state. These men were terrorists."

"President Roth, do any of these men have ties to Los Macheteros, Al Qaeda or other terrorist organization?"

"I don't know at this time. These men have barely arrived at the police headquarters, they are probably taking their fingerprints as we speak."

"Mister President, will you ask the American FBI for help?"

Pulling Strings

"The Republic of Puerto Rico is a member of Interpol, and so is the United States. In the case that we need help with information, we are sure that the United States and all other members of Interpol will honor their commitments to the organization and its core goals. I am afraid this is the last question. Please contact my press secretary for additional information."

President Roth quickly left the press room.

The press conference had been broadcast live on CNN and all major news outlets.

When Vélez returned to the presidential apartments he saw that everyone else was there already. Arocho, Ruby and President Roth looked like they were at least half drunk. Piccorelli and Flores seemed to be sober. They were all slumped in the sofas and easy chairs scattered around the family room. The three big screen televisions were tuned to CNN, FOX News and Telemundo.

"When did you get here?" Vélez asked Piccorelli.

President Roth replied. "Our friend Piccorelli here stayed in the Army chopper, and he was manning one of the two machine guns. He was the one that blew up the second van and probably shot a couple of the bad guys."

Piccorelli's face reddened.

"Is that true?" He asked Piccorelli.

"Something like that. I honestly can't remember much after the crew chief got shot."

Vélez walked over to the makeshift bar, filled a tumbler glass up to the brim with dark rum and sat down with the others.

"Did you talk to the first lady?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. She is furious, so I would appreciate if you can tell her how the body guard threatened to cold-cock me with his shotgun if got anywhere close to the windows."

The others started to chuckle.

"Don't laugh at your commander in chief, it is true. Ask Vélez!"

Vélez smiled. "Yeah, the guy that runs the security detail threatened to him in the head with the stock of a shotgun if he got anywhere close to the windows. If it wasn't for the protective detail, he would have run downstairs with a god damn gun."

Everyone started laughing out of control.

“Yes Mister President, I’ll talk to the First Lady. What happened to the food?”

“We sent the cooks home, but the grills are still out in the terrace. We can grill these ourselves without setting La Fortaleza on fire, right?” Roth asked.

Because the attacks had been carried out in the open and in such a public place, it was impossible for the government to be covert about the investigation. Vélez wanted to send the surviving attackers to the holding facilities in Fort Allen in Salinas, but he knew that he couldn’t do it without compromising everything else happening at the remote location. The four men were taken to different locations in the San Juan metropolitan area.

All four surviving attackers wore old fashioned military fatigues dyed black. These were impossible to trace back since they were identical to the fatigues used by almost every urban SWAT team in the United States. None of the men carried identification, and their fingerprints had been disfigured with some kind of acid. None even had a tattoo. Each of the men had blood drawn, which would be sent to Interpol in the hope that it would trigger a match on their new DNA profiling databases network.

Tracking the source of a vans proved to be a waste of time, since all three were stolen.

The only clue so far was that Piccorelli had managed to “borrow” a facial recognition program from the Israeli embassy, which was used to run through the video feeds of the hundreds of cameras at the international airport and all local airports. The Mossad chief of station in San Juan sympathized with the Puerto Ricans, so he elected to play dumb when he was told to stay out of the mess in San Juan.

Piccorelli did not waste his time trying to run the video analysis in San Juan. He quickly convinced Vélez to have the videos flown to the CDI/CCT station at Isla de Mona, where he could have the video recognition program adapted to run in their 2,048-node parallel processing system. With luck he was positive he could have all of the video analyzed in less than a week.

He was also convinced that he would be soon asked to build a

Pulling Strings

similar processing grid somewhere in the San Juan area.

Saarbrücken, Germany

Gerhart Cohen was having a typical morning. His maid was as incompetent as they came. Firing her was no relief, since the agency would just send him another incompetent hag.

He was now wasting precious time because the moron had spilled coffee all over his new silk tie, and now he was stuck trying to pick another one when the phone rang.

Scheiss!

"What do you want," he snarled into the phone.

"Good morning Herr Cohen, I hope I am not disturbing you," said the caller.

"It is 6:35 in the *gottverdammte* morning, what do you think?"

"I am calling on the behalf of some common friends. They are very grateful for the assistance that you rendered."

"What are you talking about?"

"A few days ago you helped our friends pick up a package and deliver it to the Americans. We need a couple more favors."

"You sound very confident."

"I am."

"What if I tell you to go fuck yourself."

"What's the matter with you Germans? Always to the point! Let's see... For starters, the proper people will find out that you were working with Chávez."

"I can waltz out of that one without even trying."

"Sure, but only if that was the only thing. We can add the tax evasions, your non-scheduled contacts with your counterparts at the *Stasi*⁵⁸ in the late 1970's, and some pictures we took of you frolicking around with your 14-year old boyfriend."

"There is a problem with your argument, I don't have a 14-year

⁵⁸ The *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* or "Ministry for State Security" of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

old boyfriend. Never have, never will.”

“You won’t be so sure after you see the pictures.”

“What?”

“We even got his birth certificate.”

“What do I need to do?”

“When you hang up the phone, take a minute to walk outside to your mail box. There is a blank envelope there. The watermark in the envelope has the proper banking information for an anonymous account in Credit Suisse. We will deposit a down payment to cover your expenses. Once we are satisfied that you have performed your duties satisfactorily, we will deposit the remainder of your consulting fee.”

“How do I contact you?”

“Go to your office, there is a package waiting for you. It has a cell phone SIM card and a DVD with instructions on how to send us data. Please shred the DVD once you are done.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Gerhart was furious, but eventually his old training kicked in. He walked outside to pick up his mail and to take a quick look around the house just in case. As promised, he found the blank envelope. He walked back to his kitchen, making sure that his maid did not pay too much attention at him.

It was a security envelope, white on the outside, printed with green wavy lines on the inside. Cohen had to split the envelope and push it against a lamp fixture to see the faint printed numbers. He wrote them into his address book and burned the envelope.

Cohen drove to his office in Kaiserslautern, where he found the package on his desk.

This is either the card and the DVD, or a bomb.

It was a DVD. The card, which was the size of a thumbnail, was taped to the back of the DVD case.

Cohen told his secretary that he would fire her for cause if she disturbed him at all over the next four hours.

The DVD held instructions on how to unlock the cell phone card, plus a recommended list of cell phones to use. Cohen inserted the card into his Siemens phone to test that the card was functional.

Once satisfied, he locked it again and removed it until he could purchase a second phone.

The disc also held the public cryptography keys of his primary and emergency handlers, and instructions on when and how to contact each, and which servers to use as email relays. Cohen was satisfied that no matter how well informed these people were, they did not know he was a cryptography aficionado and he was more than familiar with public key encryption and signatures.

Cohen turned his attention to his computer. He connected to an anonymous Internet proxy server, which allowed him a certain degree of privacy while he was online. He next checked out <http://sks.keyserver.penguin.de>, where he checked the digital fingerprint of each of the public keys provided to him. Once happy that everything checked out, he turned off his proxy connection and fed the DVD into his shredder. Finally, he took the ground remains of the DVD and flushed them down his toilet.

Cohen packed his laptop computer, told his secretary that he would work from the road for the rest of the week and drove away with no particular destination.

One of the things that he really loved about his country was the magnificent shape of all of its roads, regardless of how important or crowded. Whenever stressed out, he would jump into his car and drive around for hours.

Cohen drove around the back roads north of Kaiserslautern, until eventually he made it to Worms. Once at Worms he got hungry, so he found an Internet Café where he could maybe eat a light lunch and connect to the Internet from his wireless laptop. While waiting for his food he connected through a different proxy server, and sent an encrypted email to his main handler telling him that he had received the package fine. He considered testing the cell phone card too, but he did not want anyone seeing him switching cards on his phone.

While he was eating, he noticed that he had received an encrypted message:

From: 7b73f1fc66@anon.org
To: 7e4c713@anon.org

Subject:

Welcome to the team Dear Herr Cohen

If you are reading this it means that you have accepted our offer. What I am about to ask you is very important to us, so here is the deal: if you can help us, we will turn over to you the full original contents of your dossier. Help us and all the compromising information goes away for good. We believe that you will be pleased by our mutual arrangement and will continue to consult for us after this job is done, so this release of information is an act of good faith.

What we need is complicated: We want to know where Hugo Chávez stashed the millions that he stole from. In addition to your expenses, we will pay you \$1 million US Dollars if you can help us find this money. We don't care about the money itself, since to us whatever Chávez stole from his countrymen is just pocket change. On the other hand, it means a lot to the people of Venezuela.

Thanks,
7e4c713

Cohen deleted the message.

Piccorelli counted his blessings. The Israeli facial recognition database worked incredibly well when installed in the 2,048-node supercomputing array in Mona Island. The Mossad chief of station had let him “borrow” the commercial assistant to the Israeli ambassador. The “commercial assistant” was actually a Mossad technician that traveled from embassy to embassy to do security audits, upgrades and render whatever technical help was needed by operatives in the field. After seeing how Piccorelli had improved the performance of the facial recognition database by using cheap computers running in parallel, he sent a request up the chain of command for funding to build such a system as soon as possible.

The request was approved on the spot.

Since Puerto Rico and Israel had formal defense industry connections, it was no trouble for Israel to hire Puerto Rican Defense Industries (PRDI) to build the new system. As it was the norm, Piccorelli received a very generous finder’s fee for helping create this new product.

Even with the improvements, it still took over 96 hours for the facial recognition program to process all of the available video feeds from the morning of the attacks in Old San Juan. They managed to track each of the attackers from the moment they crossed the customs check until they were picked up at the front curb of the airport.

34

**La Fortaleza,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

The First Lady of the Republic of Puerto Rico used to say that the President of the Republic was an old school Capitalist, and as such he had picked certain vices and bad customs as a captain of the industry, before he got bit by the public service bug. For example, he did not drink a lot, but he smoke stinking cigars. He also played too much golf. And he had zero sense of political correctness.

They have been married for over twenty years, and most of the time these things did not bug her. What bugged her was walking into the executive wing and seeing how President Roth still stuck to his “two secretaries” rule.

Roth always kept two secretaries. One was young, pretty and borderline stupid. The other one was a veteran corporate secretary with more than 30 years experience, and with a temper to match. The pretty secretary had a ceremonial role: she was the one that answered the outside phone lines and walked visitors from the reception area into the executive offices.

The older secretary was widely known as the “old battleaxe” and was acknowledged as the unofficial vice-president of the Republic. Even President Roth’s Chief of Staff was scared of her.

The First Lady walked into the executive wing and ignored the current pretty thing sitting outside her husband’s office and kept walking until she found the old battleaxe’s office. Her door was open but she still knocked out of courtesy.

“Good morning Mrs. Cortijo.”

“Good morning Mrs. Roth. He is alone in there, been talking to himself for the last hour.”

“That bad?”

“Either you take him out of the office until he calms down or I will staple my resignation letter to his forehead.”

“I am going to take him to Aguas Buenas, he needs to lay back

and relax for a day or two.”

“You do that, otherwise he’ll have to send Miss Universe there to secretary school.”

“I am personally embarrassed that he still keeps that bimbo around.”

“It could be worse. At least he has never slept with her,” she said jokingly. “Plus I like having her around, she is a good decoy, that way I can do my god damn work”

Mrs. Roth walked into her husband’s office without knocking. President Roth had been staring out his window and into San Juan Bay when he heard the door open.

He turned around and was at once glad that he was not annoyed enough to say something stupid, since he knew that his wife would make sure to make him pay dear hell for it.

“Hey babe.”

“Hey yourself. Your secretary says that either you stop talking to yourself or she will staple her resignation letter to your forehead.”

“Actually, it would be worse. She qualifies for retirement, so she would be stapling a half-inch thick stack of forms to my forehead. That’s got to hurt.”

Mrs. Roth dropped her purse on his desk, a monstrous carved wood affair that belonged more at a museum than at a working office, took her husband’s arm and walked him out to the terrace that overlooks the Old San Juan fortifications and the bay.

“You are tired, you have been working nonstop for years before you got elected. You are burning out. Stop micro-managing your people and let them do their jobs.”

“I am trying to, honey. I got good people working for me, God knows how lucky I am. Sure, I lost the Admiral, but god dammit, those kids we got working at CDI and at the CCT in Mayaguez and Mona are just plain amazing.”

“Then give them some room and step back, let them do what they have to do.”

“I already did. We got this kid from Virginia, 25-year old, a plain boring programmer. We bring him here and in days he builds a supercomputer out of spare obsolete computers. I was ready to sign a

\$10 million purchase order with Cray Research and this kid walks in and shows us how to get about 75% of the performance for about \$500 worth of old crap, and free software. So we send him to London for a conference, sort of a thank you gift for a job well done. Next thing we know he is helping run a field operation that ended up netting Hugo frickin Chávez.”

“That’s pretty impressive!”

“That’s nothing. I invited the guys over for grilled steaks while you were away, and he was flying here on an ARPR chopper. When the attack started, the helicopter’s crew chief got killed. That kid, with no military training, blew up one of the vans in the attack and probably killed at least two of the attackers.”

“My God!”

“There’s more. Right after the attacks he personally calls the Israeli embassy and demands to talk to the head of their spy service, the Mossad. Those guys don’t really exist, if you know what I mean. Guess what? They take his call and agree to lend him a copy of a classified program that they use to identify faces in a video tape. A week later, he has improved on their software and has already analyzed all of the videos taken at all of the airports for four hours before the attacks.”

“That kid is really something!”

“Then the Israelis called their home office and asked permission to hire us to upgrade their systems. That was a multi-million dollar contract.”

“He gets something, right?”

“Yeah, standard finder’s fee on any foreign sales contract. And we are going to start grooming him.”

“Good, why don’t we ditch this joint? We can go to Aguas Buenas, sleep late and drink too much.”

“What about Willie?”

“The girl.”

“Still? Three weeks with the same girl? When do we meet her?”

“Not this weekend.”

“OK, I get it.”

Mrs. Roth stood on her tiptoes and kissed her husband lightly on the lips.

“Call your troops and read them the riot act. Keep the list short. I’ll start packing.”

Elsewhere in San Juan, Major Carlos Arocho, ARPR, was talking to himself. He was reading his daily dispatches, mostly email messages sent by agents from throughout the world, many of them Puerto Ricans living abroad and acting voluntarily.

So far most of the dispatches dealt with media coverage on the Hugo Chávez trial in Washington, and the terrorist attacks in Old San Juan.

Next he noticed that he had a dispatch from 7e4c713@anon.org, the German ex-spook that he was blackmailing him into helping him tracking down the millions stolen by Chávez. Due to compartmentalization rules, Arocho was never told that 7e4c713 was in fact Gerhart Cohen. It also meant that Julio Cesar Piccorelli, the only CDI agent that had met Cohen in person, did not know that Gerhart Cohen and 7e4c713 were in fact the same person.

7e4c713 informed that he had contacted some of the people that Chávez had left behind when he was kidnapped and delivered to Ramstein Air Force Base. They were furious because he had promised them a cut, but once the feds got to him all bets were off. He now had the names of all of the banks involved plus the account numbers, and he was going to start making use of his old banking connections to at least verify that the accounts actually existed and how hard it would be to access their contents.

Arocho could almost taste the victory beer he would drink once he nailed the god damn money. He typed a contact report, signed it electronically and printed three copies. The electronic version would stay available in the CDI databases, while the printed copies would be signed and stored in Arocho’s safe and the operations master safe. The third copy would go off site to an underground vault in Mona Island.

Arocho disposed of the printed copies before returning his attention to the dispatch list. He purposely left 7e4c713’s reply for the last, since it would take him longer to process it. Once done, he decided that he wanted to talk to Lieutenant Colonel Vélez before sending out his reply.

Pulling Strings

Arocho was well aware that CDI was still so small that it placed an inhuman burden on Vélez and the very few others that kept the shop running. Under ideal conditions, Vélez would have had at least four deputies for operations, administration, technology and intelligence. Because of this there had been an informal agreement between the section leads to try to keep the distractions on Lieutenant Colonel Vélez to a minimum.

Arocho thought that this was an extraordinary exception that could not wait the morning brief. He grabbed his copy of the message and walked over to the executive section. Vélez had closed his door, not that it made a difference; he could easily tell that Vélez was screaming at somebody.

He could not tell if it was in person or at somebody on the phone.

Arocho knocked.

“Get in!”

As soon as he was inside, he could tell that Vélez was still on the phone. He signaled Arocho to close the door and to sit down.

Still on the phone, Vélez walked over to a white board hung on one of the walls and wrote “recruiting.”

Arocho nodded as if that made it clear, but he was still clueless.

“Stop,” Vélez barked at the phone. “Do not insult my intelligence by talking to me like I am some god damn butter bar⁵⁹ on his first week of platoon duty.”

Arocho could hear what seemed to be a muffled, yet insincere apology.

“This is very simple,” Vélez replied, still agitated. “We need more people. You are our recruiter. You are failing miserably.”

More muffled noises coming from the phone.

“Shut the fuck up until I am done talking. We have higher pay than the US Services, we offer more education benefits, lateral transfers in the worst case and a more liberal mortgage guarantee program than the one offered to the Veterans in the United States. Don’t tell me that people are not interested.”

Less muffled noises.

“This is what I am going to do. I think all these years sitting be-

⁵⁹ A second lieutenant in the US Army, The US Marines or the US Air Force, or an Ensign in the US Navy, because their insignia is a gold bar.

hind a god damn desk took out the soldier in you. To fix this I am going to send you the Sergeant Major of the god damn Army of the fucking Republic of Puerto Rico. So help me God, you are not getting out of this mess until either the Sergeant Major says that you are OK, or you die trying. Let's see how you cut it with an ex-Ranger, ex-Green Beret that also proved his worth as a god damn recruiter."

Vélez hung up and Arocho started clapping.

Vélez bowed.

"Do you think he bought it?"

"Oh yeah, you sounded like you were ready to drive over and kick his ass."

"You know that guy?"

"Yeah, that asshole is a career recruiter, they used to call him '95% man.' He never pushed himself to finish something 100%."

"We need people, and he is all we got for now. We got all the money that we need, but we don't have enough people. Now, what is it that you wanted?"

"I got lucky with the German dude."

"Oh yeah? What did he do?"

"He found the rest of the people that traveled with Chávez, and before long he had the names of the banks and even the account numbers."

"Don't get too excited about it, if they gave him the account numbers it means it won't be easy to get to the money."

"That's what I am going to tell him. Anything else I need to send him?"

"No, that will do fine."

"Are you really sending out your uncle to square away the recruiters?"

"Hell yes."

35

**Rio Piedras,
Republic of Puerto Rico**

Staff Sergeant José Luis Cardona, ARPR (formerly Staff Sergeant, US Army Recruiting Command, Miami Battalion), was still recovering from the monumental ass chewing that he got from that asshole Colonel over at Buchanan. Sergeant Cardona considered himself a professional recruiter and did not like to be second-guessed by the child wonder, which is what they had started to call him behind his back.

The ARPR recruiting station had been placed in Rio Piedras hoping it would attract the kids from the main campus of the University of Puerto Rico, just a block away, and the few private universities in the area. In reality, the campus was incredibly anti-militaristic. After a couple of weeks of trying to engage the kids on the street and at the campus, the recruiters spent most of their days watching the clock move.

The current recruiting detachment consisted of Sergeant Cardona, who acted as chief of station, plus three buck sergeants. The four men knew each other back at the recruiting battalion in Miami, where they had specialized in recruiting bilingual kids. Most of these kids were second and third generation Cubans, who had no reservations about enlisting in the US Army. Most of them dreamed up of being called up to help overthrow Castro.

Sergeant Cardona was ready to lock up the office for a long lunch, maybe sit outside and watch the college girls walk by, when the front doors flew open.

Jesus Christ, he almost broke the glass!

Sergeant Major Marco Antonio Flores, ARPR, slowly walked in and around the office, looking more disappointed than disgusted. He was wearing his ACU with ARPR and US Army insignia.

“Get on your god damn feet.”

Nobody moved.

He screamed “get on your god damn feet, are you deaf?”

The three buck sergeants bolted up and assumed the position of parade rest: standing erect, with their feet spread 12 inches apart, their hands placed smartly in the small of their backs.

Cardona did not move.

“You must be the sorry sack of shit that is running this place into the ground. Get up.”

Cardona stared at him, but did not move.

Sergeant Major Flores took out a whistle from one of his breast pockets, then blew it as loud as humanly possible. The sound pierced through their ears.

Less than a second later, Staff Sergeant Andrés Caratini, ARPR (formerly of FURA) came trotting, followed by the two biggest military policemen any of the men (Flores included) had ever seen.

“Sergeant Caratini,” he said, pointing at Cardona, “take that cock-sucker under custody.”

Sergeant Caratini nodded to the two MP’s, who quickly walked across the office and stood to either side of Sergeant Cardona.

“What the fuck is the charge?” He asked.

The MP to his right took out his night stick and jabbed Cardona under his ribs.

“You talk when instructed to talk,” said the MP.

“Since you asked, the charge is dereliction of duty, insubordination, conduct unbecoming a non-commissioned officer, and disobeying a general order.”

“That’s bullshit!”

The second MP took out his night stick and viciously hit him on the back of his knees. Cardona landed on his face.

“I thought we told you to shut up.”

Sergeant Major Flores was pleased to see the other three sergeants were close to wetting their pants, which is exactly what he wanted.

“Take this piece of shit away from here.”

The MP’s cuffed Sergeant Cardona and started to drag him away. Sergeant Caratini stopped them, then searched Cardona’s pockets until he found his security pass card and keys. Once he made sure that both the Sergeant Major and the other sergeants had seen the gesture, he let them take Cardona away. Caratini handed the card

and keys to Sergeant Major Flores and left to catch with the MP's, who by now had probably found a way to make Cardona bump his forehead onto the door frame of their Ford Crown Victoria unmarked cruiser.

Sergeant Major Flores told the other three sergeants to relax and sit down.

"That cocksucker Cardenas was a bad apple. We are giving you three a clean slate, so you can prove to us that the problems this office was having were due to poor leadership."

"Sergeant Major, with all due respect, recruiting here is a hell of a lot harder than in Miami."

"Actually, it is the other way around, recruiting here is no harder than in any average recruiting station in the United States. Recruiting in a major city, like Miami, LA, New York, is usually too easy. There are always more kids trying to enlist than whatever slots you have available."

The three recruiters looked at him like they still did not believe him.

"Those offices are called walk-in recruiting stations. Kids walk into the office and you process them. The real recruiting happens at the other 99% of the stations. It means you have to work hard and use your training to meet your quota."

"The kids here are hippies, they want nothing to do with the Army," protested one of the sergeants.

"Yeah, I know that, and Colonel Vélez knows it too. But we all know that there are thousands of able bodied, intelligent men and women out there. All you have to do is look for them. Get off your asses and do the work we hired you to do."

The three sergeants nodded.

"Prove to me that you know what the fuck you are doing, or the three of you lose a stripe and will end up the rest of your enlistment picking up spent brass at the firing ranges in Salinas."

Sergeant Major Flores quickly stood up and walked away before they could reply.

He walked around the corner and got into his Suburban, then drove to the old ROTC training center at the UPR campus. While waiting in traffic he called Lieutenant Colonel Vélez to report on his

progress.

“You done already?” Vélez asked.

“Yeah. I arrested Cardona and read the riot act to the other three.”

“I wish this wasn’t necessary but I can’t allow this kind of bullshit when we are so short-handed.”

“Yeah, you are trying to run a military organization, not the god damn boy scouts.”

“How did Caratini work out?”

“He was perfect. It was also nice to have the goons with him. Where did they come from?”

“Those two were Army MP’s, but they spent most of their time working at Fort Leavenworth⁶⁰.”

“Nice find.”

“We get lucky every now and then.”

“I gotta hang up, I am almost at the campus.”

“Trials?”

“Yeah.” Flores said goodbye to his nephew and hung up.

Sergeant Major Flores parked at the edge of the fitness training complex. He was pleased to see that the rest of his team was already in place.

Flores walked over to the folding tables that were being used as a registration station. To his professional delight, there were dozens of young men and women waiting in line to register for the event.

Flores was a firm believer in planning and preparation. You pick a handful of capable people, you give them basic goals and you let them worry about the details. His cadre, most of them ex-drill sergeants in the US Army and the US Marines, were perfectly qualified to put together a screening test, so he let them do it. They had already measured the oval quarter mile running track three times, and they had placed timing sensors around the track. Each runner would have a number pinned to his or her shirt. The number had a tiny microchip taped to it, which would broadcast it’s serial number to the timing sensors. This way they could manage the race with less personnel at hand than if they tried to use observers with

⁶⁰ Also known as the United States Disciplinary Barracks (USDB) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the only maximum security prison in the Department of Defense.

chronometers.

He also noticed that they had put together plenty of push-up and sit-up testing stations, which would make sure that there would be no bottlenecks during testing.

They even had setup water stations and a field tent with a first aid station.

The physical part of the testing consisted of three timed events and three open events. Each applicant must run two miles in less than 18 minutes, perform 20 well-formed push-ups in two minutes and 40 well-formed sit ups in two minutes. They also had to run through a series of obstacles, mostly to amuse the drill sergeants, the Sergeant Major and anyone curious enough to go down to the athletic field to watch the whole mess.

They were hoping that some of the spectators would find it interesting enough to try it the next time they ran the trials.

The Sergeant Major walked around, trying to make it obvious that he wanted to watch and that he had found nothing at fault. He was trying very hard to make sure his people understood that they were autonomous and he trusted them to do their jobs right.

Once the testing was completed, the drill sergeants would get together and rank the participants based on raw physical fitness scores and how confidently did they navigate the obstacle course. They would be also judged at a more subjective level, for example, a kid that was out of shape could possibly show much more motivation than a jock, and high motivation was always welcome.

The event lasted a little under two hours. After everything was done, the Sergeant Major addressed the participants with a little speech in which he thanked them for being there and explained to them what would be the next step for those selected. The cadre already had their orders: they had 18 hours to come up with a list of candidates. These would be subjected to staggered background checks.

First they would run them through the local police and department of justice databases, including records that would usually be off-limits because the person in question was not of legal age when a crime or infraction was committed. This was not done to disqualify the participants, instead it was needed to put together a much

more complete dossier on each person.

The next step was to run each participant through a battery of medical tests, to try to weed out anyone with a yet-undetected birth defect that could easily kill the poor kid after a day or two of boot camp. Height and weight were not going to be disqualifying factors, since they could always transfer out to a non-combat oriented specialty. The medical tests also included psychiatric testing, again more as a way to have a better dossier than as an excuse for disqualifying them. The way they saw it, there was plenty of room in an Army for all sorts of crazy people.

There was an additional step but only for these individuals that were to be considered for work at CDI or other sensitive positions. These lucky few would be subjected to an extensive background investigation that would last no less than six months and virtually put their lives under a microscope.

36

Augusta National Country Club, Georgia

The Augusta National Country Club, home of the Masters, the most prestigious golf tournament in the United States, prided itself with its long traditions and its closed membership. Still, all it took was a phone call from the Chief of Staff of the President of the United States to not only get him a tee time, but to make sure the course was empty. The President needed a neutral location for a very important meeting, and privacy was critical. Due to political factors, it was not possible to run the meeting at either the White House or at Camp David. Running the meeting at Augusta National would provide both the needed privacy and luxurious accommodations to match.

The President of the United States was meeting the President of the Republic of Puerto Rico for the first time.

The agenda was secret, only the presidents knew what they would be talking about. Since both men were accomplished golfers, they would only talk while out on the course. The First Wives were experienced golf widows, so they stayed at the clubhouse.

Since both Presidents were relatively young, they carried their own clubs. Security was provided by mixed teams of US Secret Service and from the Presidential Security detail of the Puerto Rican Police. They had people stationed at all of the holes, plus agents riding in golf carts.

President Albert Finello won the tee toss for the first drive. Finello was setting up his drive when he noticed that Roth was making faces at him.

“What the fuck?”

“Sorry, I always get a kick whenever I see a lefty drive. Carry on.”

Finello cursed, then drove his ball. He failed to give the ball enough lift, instead it shot forward until it hit the lip of the lonely fairway bunker some 200 yards away. The ball popped up, then landed about a yard in front of the bunker.

Roth did not say a word. He placed his shot, and at the last second, turned around.

“What?”

“You sonofabitch, you are a lefty too!”

“So?”

“Just drive the damn ball.”

Roth also failed to give the ball enough lift, in his case the ball hit the bunker and lost most of its energy before rolling up to the lip.

“For the record,” said Roth. “I do that every time. It is impossible to hit a good drive on the first hole.”

“I know,” replied Finello, “I learned it the hard way. Easy to just ditch that one and then concentrate on the other 17.”

The two men picked their club bags and started walking. It was a beautiful day and for a second they forgot they had to talk business. At least they had the course to themselves, no ranger to hurry them to maintain the pace.

“How’s Chávez?” Roth asked.

“Still an asshole. He still doesn’t suspect that you guys picked him up.”

“Good. Do you think you can convict him?”

“We have to. If he walks he will never be able to go back to Venezuela. The second he lands there they will execute him.”

“Yeah. Are you tracking down the money?” Roth asked.

“Of course. You?”

“Yeah, not making much progress.”

“We got the account numbers but that’s not enough,” Finello explained. “And sure, we froze his accounts here, but that is a small percentage of the fortune he stole.”

“What are you planning to do with the money?”

“It’s pocket change to us, but if we can give it back to the Venezuelans it might make a difference to them.”

“Same with us,” Roth conceded.

“Plus it doesn’t hurt you in the foreign relations department.”

Roth smiled.

So this is what is bugging him.

“Of course. I actually debated paying it out of our own treasury and then worry about collecting from Chávez later.”

Pulling Strings

“What about Cuba.”

Let the games begin.

“There is nothing going on with Cuba.”

“C’mon Roth, you are talking to Fidel! You are spending billions on infrastructure all over the Caribbean. Cuba is next.”

“I am doing you a favor. You can’t touch Cuba. Ever. Somebody else has to do the job. We are a friendly economy, and we have consistently proved over the last five years that we can use our riches to kickstart the economies that surround us.”

“We noticed. We also noticed that you are starting to build up your military.”

“Of course we are. We are a sovereign nation.”

“The infrastructure build up is scaring the shit out of my guys. They got this crazy idea that you are making sure to be able to move around at will.”

Roth smiled again.

“Actually, it is the other way around. The rail lines and the roads are just a lucky byproduct. What we wanted was the right-of-ways so we could bury optical fiber and expand the telecommunications infrastructure.”

“Why?” Finello asked.

Finello started to think that it sounded so crazy that it had to be true.

“Cheap telecommunications are a sure way to get these people out of the agrarian mindset,” Roth explained. “Next we start moving factories from Puerto Rico to the other islands, where we can pay them a fraction of what we pay them in the island.”

“What about your citizens?”

“They are still busy as hell. We lower the unemployment rate and can afford to spend more money on social programs.”

“That oil is not going to last forever,” Finello warned.

“Of course it won’t. Why do you think we are pouring millions into alternative energy sources and those car batteries?”

“So all this expansion, what you are really doing is buying yourself a buffer?”

“Yeah. We are taking advantage of them, sure. But they are getting paid very nicely.”

“What are you going to do when you lose the elections? Or worse, some asshole manages to pass a constitutional amendment to add term limits?”

“Another reason for the building frenzy. We are building a speeding locomotive, and the best part is that it is constitutionally protected from tampering. The president makes one dollar per year, which means you have to be either rich or pensioned just to consider running for office. The old parties are still active, and they still remember the two ass kickings we gave them.”

“What are you going to do when Fidel Castro kicks the bucket?”

“I am going to appeal to Raúl Castro’s greed. He is going to get pensioned before he spends one day in office.”

Finello was shocked. He had expected to twist Roth’s arm to get him to confess it.

“Fuck golf, let’s drop the bags here. This conversation is too interesting to spoil it by shooting them god damn little balls.”

Both men laughed.

Finello made a hand signal and one of the golf carts sped up to catch them. The cart had a beer cooler strapped to the back.

“How did you know that I liked Bitburger?” Roth asked.

“One of our generals served with you back in the day, he remembers you developed a taste for bitter beer.”

“How did you get it?”

“Easy, we called Ramstein and we had the next C-5 crew to fly us a couple crates.”

“Nice.”

Each President emptied one bottle quickly, then took a second one and started walking again.

“We were talking about Castro,” Roth said. “We are going to pay Raúl whatever it takes to get him to pack his bags and fly off to Switzerland.”

“And then what?”

“We’ll help stage a mock coup to cover up for Raúl leaving. Anyone above the rank of Colonel will go into custody at one of the hotels in Havana, mostly to protect them from getting lynched. While we arrange to get them out of the country, we’ll help the Cuban Army organize general elections under international supervision.”

"You think you can pull it off?"

"Not really, but you are going to help me."

"Me? Why the fuck should I help you take over Cuba?"

"Because you need Cuba more than we do."

"Keep talking."

"When Cuba's government falls, we'll make joint announcements to help them in their transition into democracy. Fat aid packages, trade deals, the works."

"This is almost collusion."

"It is if we pillaged Cuba. We aren't, all we are doing is making amends for all the shit that these people have had to put up with for over sixty years."

Finello nodded.

"By the way, we are starting a special forces school."

"With the guys you stole from us?"

"I did not *steal* them, I just made them a better offer. I was wondering if your kids would like to come down to play with my kids."

"Inter-service cooperation?"

"Sure."

"Why the hell not?"

The two men shook hands, finished their beers and waved to the drinks cart to bring them more.

Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for their help in getting my thoughts into writing:

My wife Ivette and my son PJ, for always being there.

My mother Gloria, for teaching me to read very early and fostering my love for books.

The participants of the 2005 National Novel Writing Month, because misery loves company.

My Online friends at the Undernet chat network and elsewhere, for buying my first book the minute it went on sale, and for helping me by reading my drafts and making fun of my wild hare plots.

Tom Clancy, Stephen King, William E. Buttersworth (W.E.B. Griffin), John Grisham, Stuart Woods and Daniel Silva, for writing the kind of addictive fiction that costs me my sleep, my sanity and pushes me to keep writing no matter what happens.

And last but not least, to my two writing "buddies," Dr. Karla Akins and David B. Smith, for always being one email or instant message away from a brain picking session. They are the best friends any writer could ever hope for.

To all of you, my deepest and most sincere thanks!

Pedro Alberto Vera

A word from the author

This book was written in an Apple iMac G5 desktop and Open Office Writer 2.0. Open Office is a fully-featured and free office software suite that runs on Windows, Mac OS X, Linux and many other operating systems. It can read and write Microsoft Office documents but it won't cost you a penny! Open Office is available free at:

<http://openoffice.org>

The proof reading for this book was coordinated with a web-based trouble ticket management system called osTicket. This tool proved to be very useful when coordinating the revisions from a half dozen proof readers scattered throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. osTicket is available for free from:

<http://osticket.com>

I always appreciate your comments, thoughts and hate mail. Just drop me a note at pedro@veraperez.com, or you can also visit my web page at <http://veraperez.com>. I post new content to my web site at least a half dozen times a day, and I always love to receive feedback from my readers. If you are a literary agent or publisher, I welcome commercial inquiries at the same email address.

Pedro Alberto Vera
January 10, 2006
Reston, Virginia

Pedro Alberto Vera

About Creative Commons

Creative Commons is a non-for-profit foundation that aims to help authors and artists so they can provide flexible licensing to their works without losing the protection of a traditional copyright.

For more information about Creative Commons please visit <http://creativecommons.org> or write:

Corporate Headquarters
Creative Commons
543 Howard Street, 5th Floor
San Francisco, CA
94105-3013

United States

Geek Stuff

This book was written and formatted using OpenOffice, <http://openoffice.org>

OpenOffice is available for all major operating systems, for free and with no strings attached. I have purchased Microsoft Office in the recent past and I feel very strongly about the level of quality and involvement of the fine folks that have made OpenOffice a reality. If you are considering purchasing Microsoft Office please at least take a look at OpenOffice and see if it may be able to fulfill your needs.

For more information on the philosophies of the free software and open source software movements, please visit the following sites:

1. The Open Source Initiative, <http://www.opensource.org>
2. The GNU Project, <http://www.gnu.org>
3. The Free Software Foundation, <http://www.fsf.org>

About the Author

Pedro Alberto Vera describes himself as a “deranged mechanical engineer now stuck in the web applications hell of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.” This is of course, true.

Pedro was born, raised and educated in the US Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the east most island of the Greater Antilles in the Caribbean Sea. After college he enlisted in the United States Army, where he served for five years as a satellite communications control specialist. On receiving his honorable discharge he moved with his wife to the Virginia side of the Washington suburbs, where he was hired by a civilian company to do the same kind of work he used to do for the Army. Three years later he walked away from the electronics field to work full time as a web applications developer.

Pedro lives somewhere in North Virginia with his wife and son, where he works as the resident geek for a marketing research firm. He is currently working on his next book, which he expects to release in Summer 2006.

Visit Pedro's Web Log at <http://veraperez.com>

How to Buy this Book

I hope you really liked my book! If you would like to own a printed copy, you have a few choices:

1. Order it from <http://lulu.com/pedro>
2. Order it from Amazon, the ISBN is 1-4116-6884-7
3. Order it from any local bookstore that has access to Books in Print, just use the ISBN, 1-4116-6884-7